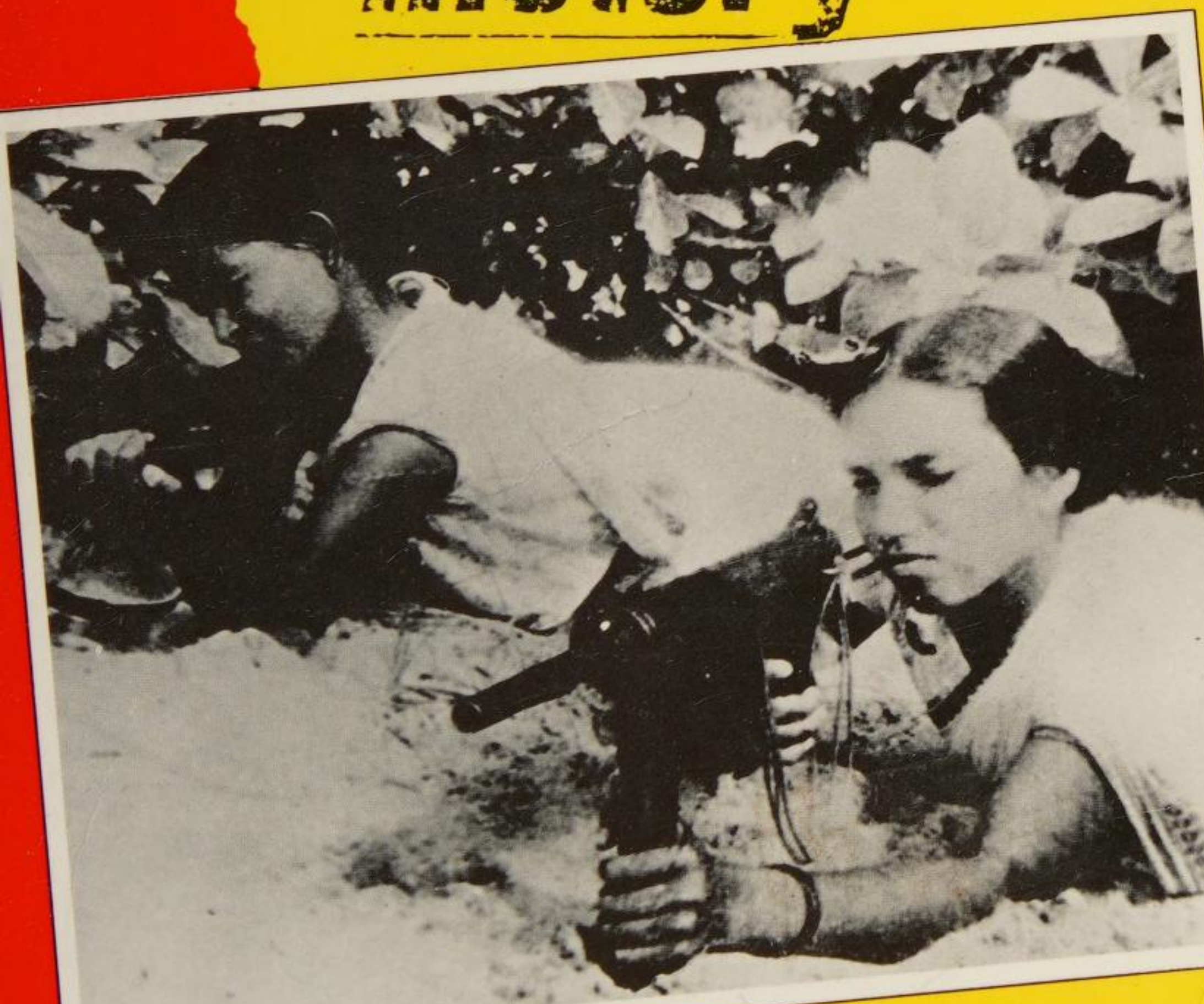
'We Were Making History'



Women and the Telangana Uprising

STREE SHAKTI SANGHATANA

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

To the unknown women and their
unnamed struggles that created history

'We Were Making History. . .'

Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People's Struggle

LALITA K., VASANTHA KANNABIRAN,
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Stree Shakti Sanghatana

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Adivamma
Arutla Kamaladevi
Bhimreddy Yashodamma
Chilukuri Abbamma
Communist Ailamma
Dayani Sashirekha
Dayani Kausalya
Dayani Ramachudamma
Doodipala Nagalakshmamma
Dronavalli Anasuyamma
Gajjela Lingamma
Jakkula Chandramma
Josyabhatla Subbamma
Katragadda Hanumayamma
K. Vajramma
Konne Pullamma
M. Lakshmi
Mantrala Ramulamma
Madiraboyina Lacchavva
Nanabala Somakka
Namala Lakshmamma
Nimmagadda Satyavathy
Paruchuri Suryamba
Penchikeldinne Rangamma
Ponnava Salamma
Santamma
Sarada Krishnamurthy
Todeti Muttamma
Tuniki Bakkamma
Tuniki Muttamma
Uddharaju Manikyamba
Vellanki Annapurnamma
Yellapragada Sitakumari.

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Burrakatha Squad : names from left Kondepudi Radha,Tapi Rajamma and Viramachineni Sarojini

The Telangana People's Struggle: A Background*

The 'Telangana People's Struggle', the armed resistance of women and men to the feudal oppression in the Telangana region of the princely state of Hyderabad is now legendary. Under British rule India consisted of (a) the British administered provinces of India known as British India (b) 'princely India' or those states governed by princes, maharajas, rajas, and nawabs: among these was Hyderabad which came under the Nizam. In the year 1947 there were some 565 such states, all subservient allies of the King Emperor George VI who exercised his supremacy over them through his Viceroy who also ruled over the rest of India. Under this special relationship (known as Paramountcy) between the Indian princes and the crown, the princes, within their own kingdoms, were like medieval monarchs and enjoyed dynastic rights. They behaved as arbitrarily as medieval potentates with their courts, ministers and harems, and allowed themselves numerous pleasures, whims and eccentricities. The crown undertook 'to protect the rulers and their dynasties from external aggression or internal revolt' and, in return, the rulers recognized the right of the crown 'to conduct their foreign relations, regulate disputed successions, conduct minority administration, intervene in their internal affairs in case of gross misrule, and lease territories to receive financial subventions in return for military protection.' The princely state of Hyderabad was the largest among such states and was governed, at the time of the Telangana struggle, by Asaf Jah Nawab Mir Osman Ali Khan Bahadur, the last Nizam of Hyderabad.

The Nizam's state of Hyderabad covered a substantial part of the southern plateau (the Deccan Plateau) in the Indian peninsula. Its total area was some 82,000 square miles and its predominantly

* Commonly also referred to as the Telangana Peasant Struggle or the Telangana Armed Struggle. All three forms have been used in this book as broad equivalents.

Hindu population totalled 18.6 million in 1951. The state had three linguistic regions: Telangana, which consisted of nine districts of Telugu speaking people; Marathwada—five districts of Marathi speaking people; and the three Kannada speaking districts of Karnataka. Telangana constituted a majority—47 per cent of the total population while the other two regions shared the rest except the 12 per cent accounted for by the Urdu speaking Muslim population. The Telangana struggle, led by the communists, was a struggle against the autocratic rule of the Nizam and the feudal oppression of the zamindari system. At its height over three million people in 3,000 villages spread over several districts in Telangana came under its influence. In villages controlled by the communist peasant guerillas, *vetti* (forced labour and exactions) and bonded labour stopped, agricultural wages rose, seized land was returned to peasant owners and other land distributed. For peasant women and men this struggle was a matter of life and death. Women and men from the city of Hyderabad were drawn, or chose to be drawn, into it for it held the promise of freedom from cultural and intellectual oppression. The history of the Telangana struggle has been written, by some who have led the struggle, as a history of the movement, its lessons and its ideological controversies, and by others in the form of memoirs. These histories include vivid and inspiring accounts of the new dimensions of social and cultural life in the liberated areas. Our idea is not just to repeat that exercise. Ours is an attempt to analyse and understand the ideological framework in which women struggled, the experiential dimensions of that struggle and its implications for the women's question. It is an attempt to broaden the history of that struggle by recovering the subjective experience of women; to capture women's voices from the past and to present issues as they were perceived by women. The fact that not many women were there at the decision making, or leadership levels, does not make their participation peripheral for, given the structures, the real question that needs to be posed is whether women could have been present at the decision making level or not.

It may not be possible to reconstruct the history of the Telangana struggle from the interviews presented here. But the voices of women tell us what ordinary history does not. They give us a sense of the times they lived in. Often there is little chronological order to their narration, we find few ideological formulations. Forty

years after, some talked of incidents as if they had happened yesterday, giving graphic descriptions and minute details. For others, the accounts are only what has percolated through the years. Stories told and untold, those that one can read between the lines, give us a sense of the structure of their experience and emotions, their expectations and disappointments. What is the relevance of the Telangana struggle to the women's question and what is the relevance of the experience of the women in the struggle to the left movement today? Who were the women who came into the movement and why did they come? How far were they able to loosen the grip of the feudal ideology and of patriarchal norms? Was the Communist Party able to create a new image of women by articulating their problems and finding solutions in their own terms? It is to these issues that we address ourselves.

The feudal order in Telangana

> My mother was a slave—three generations worked as slaves in the master's house—it seems we were Telagas originally. Many years ago, in a time of hardship, my mother's grandmother was sold for a measure of rice and a rupee to a Brahmin family. Then she stayed there in that house as a slave, working there, kept by one or other of the *doras*. So it continued. My father did not marry anyone else. He came to live with this cousin who was wealthy. He helped his cousin with the *patwari's* work. My mother was also there and when she came of age he said he would keep her. They lived together and you can call it marriage or being kept or whatever you will.

That is the story of Kamalamma of Warangal who, unable to bear the misery of her life, joined the Communist Party. Feudal ownership of land in the Nizam's state of Hyderabad involved ownership or control over all the people who lived on that land. As the biggest owners of land, the zamindars in Telangana claimed and enjoyed proprietorial rights over the peasants—men, women and children. Everything the men suffered under the system, the women suffered twice over. If the landlord fancied a woman, she was taken. When she got married, it was the prerogative of the landlord to sleep with her on the first night. The women who were concubines (*adi bapas*) had to look after the needs of the landlord and his family.

The history of the Nizam's state of Hyderabad goes back to the

period of the disintegration of the Moghul Empire in India. The 1720s saw the virtual division of the empire into two. The Moghul Governor in the Deccan, Asaf-Jah, broke away from the Empire and set up the independent state of Hyderabad, with its capital town (which bore the same name) near the fortress of Golconda. Asaf-Jah and his successors assumed the title of Nizam-ul-Mulk, fought against the Marathas and held sway over south India. With the rise of British colonialism in India, the Nizam's state, like other princely states, came to enjoy a special relationship with the British crown under the doctrine of Paramountcy. The most important feature of the political organization of the Nizam's state was the *jagirdari* system of land tenure. About a third of the state's total area came under this system. Those, both Muslims and Hindus, who were loyal to the Asaf Jahi Nizam received *jagirs* and became revenue officials or generals in his army. The *jagirs* became hereditary property and *jagirdars* acquired the right to enjoy land revenue from them. In addition, they also had rights over excise, forests and fisheries, and exercised police and judicial functions. Other than the *jagirdars*, there were also some traditional Hindu rulers who had governed the area even before the arrival of Asaf-Jah. Their rights were recognized by the Nizam in return for the payment of an annual tribute. The rulers of these *samsthanams*, as they were called, enjoyed extensive powers of administration. The Nizam also gifted away some lands as *inams* in return for services rendered to him. In almost every village there were such *inams*.

For the Nizam's personal expenses and use there were the *sarf-e-khas* lands spread over the entire state and administered by him and his family. Forty per cent of the area of the entire state came under *jagirs, samsthanams* and *sarf-e-khas*. The remaining 60 per cent of the territory—*khalsa* or *diwani*—was directly under the administration of the state government. The *ryotwari* system operated here and taxes were collected by government officials. But before the introduction of land survey settlement, the middle-men in these areas who later received the titles of *deshmukhs, sar deshmuks, desai* or *sardesai* played an important role in the collection of land revenue. They amassed enormous stretches of land and became big landlords. The Jannareddy Pratap Reddy family whose cruelty was legendary, is known to have possessed 150,000 acres of land. Likewise, Visnur Ramachandra Reddy

owned 40,000 acres in 40 villages. The Suryapet *deshmukh* had 20,000 acres, and so on. Over 60 per cent of cultivable land in the *khalsa* areas of Telangana was under the ownership of the *deshmukhs* and big landlords. The feudal system was characteristic of those areas administered by the state as well.

Conditions in *jagir* areas were far more oppressive than in the *sarf-e-khas* lands. The civil courts had no jurisdiction over the *jagir* lands, and hence the *jagirdars* and their agents were free to collect a variety of illegal taxes from the actual cultivators and reduce them to penury. They amassed vast areas of land by duping the peasants who continued to remain tenants and to till the land for years without any ownership rights. Agricultural tenants had no security of tenure and agricultural labourers who were unable to pay the petty loans advanced by landlords became their serfs. The peasants could not inherit the land except by paying a *nazrana*. Taxes were generally higher than in *khalsa* areas and were collected forcibly even when there were no crops. Apart from land revenue, the tenants had to pay several other taxes such as house tax, profession tax etc. This reduced the peasantry to penury and serfdom. Peasants who had cultivated lands for generations were evicted and their lands given to those who paid the highest *nazrana*. Although some peasants had *patta* (title deed) rights, these excluded rights over a variety of fruit-bearing trees on the land such as tamarind, *babul*, toddy palm, mango, *mahwa* etc., which were auctioned every year to the highest bidder.

Nowhere was the feudal exploitation of the peasantry more intense than in the Telangana districts of Hyderabad state. A major dehumanizing factor for the peasantry was the prevalence of *vetti* both in *jagir* and *khalsa* areas. Free services to the landlord had to be rendered by people of different castes—washerfolk, barbers, blacksmiths, carpenters, etc. Besides, free services were extracted when officials of the revenue, police, forest, excise and other departments visited the villages. Most of the agricultural labourers on whom *vetti* obligations fell were from the lower and untouchable castes of *malas* and *madigas*. Likewise, the tribals were also exploited under the *bhagela* system, prevalent in Warangal and Nalgonda districts. The *bhagela* serfs, drawn mostly from aboriginal tribes, were customary retainers tied to their masters by debt. Unable to repay their debts they continued to work as domestic or menial labourers, generation after generation.

Before the rise of the Reddys and Kammas—the two notable castes of peasant proprietors—Brahmins were among the substantial landowners and *pattadars* in Telangana districts. Although gradually the influence of the Brahmins as a landowning class declined, they continued to be powerful in the field of politics. The *komtis* (vaisyas)—moneylenders and traders—had considerable influence on economic life in the countryside. The turn of the century saw the ascendancy of *marwadi shahukars* as moneylenders in rural Telangana. The *komtis* continued as traders and shopkeepers etc.

The bulk of the rural masses, unprotected tenants, sharecroppers, poor peasants and agricultural labourers, came either from the lower untouchable castes or from tribal groups such as the *konda reddys, koyas, chenchus, lambadis* and *banjaras*. Agricultural labour and small peasants could work for themselves only after completing operations on the landlord's fields. Even the peasant's standing crops were not safe as they could be cut down by the landlord's goondas. A network of spies and agents was maintained to terrorize the people into submission. Any deviant behaviour meant cruel and inhuman punishment. 'I am your slave' became the common form of obeisance of the Telangana peasantry. Women dared not dress well or wear flowers in their hair. 'We had to leave the food in our plate and go if there was a call from the *dora* or *dorasani*.' They were not allowed to feed their babies while working in the landlord's fields. Sexual molestation of women was the right of the landlord.

It was against such a system that the Telangana peasantry fought and they did more than anyone else to bring down the autocratic feudal regime. They constituted the backbone of the Telangana movement. Women from the poor peasantry were there in the fields facing the enemy day in and day out. As the rich and middle peasantry were also exploited by these landlords in one way or the other, they too joined the struggle. A number of women were drawn into it along with their husbands or brothers. Women from the city of Hyderabad joined the movement sometimes on their own, more often because of the involvement of a member of the family.

Social conditions

A large part of the princely state of Hyderabad was inhabited by people speaking Telugu, Marathi and Kanna.[1] The majority of the population was Hindu. The state was characterized by a total denial of linguistic and cultural rights to the majority. Educational facilities were limited. As Urdu was the only medium of instruction both at the middle and high school levels, the non–Urdu speaking people had no opportunities to enter them. Educational facilities for girls were even more meagre. The only university level institution—Osmania—was established in 1919 and was affiliated to the University of Madras. When the first war broke out there were no daily newspapers in Telugu, Marathi or Kannada while there were five in Urdu. There was a total absence of civil liberties. No public meeting could be held without the government's permission and such permission was rarely given. National leaders could not enter the state without prior permission. Student activities were compeltely restricted. They could not join any organization whether political, cultural or social. Though the Indian National Congress was formed in 1885, it was not until 1918 that the first Congress committee was formed by Vaman Naik in Hyderabad.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the Nizam's state witnessed a cultural revival with the establishment of the Arya Samaj in the year 1892 and public celebration of the Ganesh festival in 1895. The library movement (Grandhalaya Udyamam) began with the establishment of the first Telugu library, Sri Krishna Devaraja Andhra Bhashá Nilayam, in 1901. Marathi and Kannada educational societies were formed and schools were opened. What crystallized the assertion of cultural rights of the Telugu people was the establishment of the Andhra Jana Sangham in 1921 by Sri Madapati Hanumanth Rao, who was to play a pioneering role in the social and cultural uplift of the Telugu people, richly deserving the title 'Andhra Pita Maha'. The founding of the Andhra Jana Sangham was followed by a cultural revival. Books on the history of the Telugu people were published, newspapers in Telugu

[1] The Andhra State under the Madras Presidency was also a Telugu speaking state. A movement for 'Visalandhra' eventually led to the reorganization of the states on a linguistic basis. The Telangana districts of Hyderabad state were merged with the Andhra State to form the State of Andhra Pradesh in 1956.

(*Nilagiri Patrika, Golconda Patrika*) began to appear. Telugu medium schools for girls were established. (The Andhra Balika High School was established in 1928.) Soon the Andhra Jana Sangham converted itself into the Andhra Maha Sabha which was to be the focal point not only of the social and cultural but also of political activity.

What is of greater significance to our study is the emergence of women's organizations. Reformist as they were, these organizations—the All India Women's Conference, established in Hyderabad in 1916, Andhra Mahila Sabha in 1930—provided a platform for. women. Feudal culture forbade not only Muslim women but Hindu women of upper and middle classes to go out without purdah. It was unthinkable that women might speak from a public platform. It was during this period that the Andhra Mahila Sabha came into existence along with the Andhra Maha Sabha. The two organizations held parallel meetings until 1942. Later the Mahila Sabha began to hold its own separate conferences. Most of the members were from middle and upper class families. Imbued with a nationalist spirit, they took up issues relating to women such as their education, the abolition of prostitution, the abolition of the purdah system, widow remarriage etc. Often these issues were discussed in the face of resentment from conservative members of both the Andhra Mahila Sabha and the Andhra Maha Sabha. There was opposition from outside the organization as well. The third Andhra Mahila Sabha at Khammam in 1932 met in the face of severe opposition from those who proclaimed themselves protectors of Hindu Dharma. Yellapragada Sita Kumari, a vocal and ardent social worker presided over the meeting and the proceedings were carried on. The Maharashtrians and Kannadigas formed their own platform in the Maharashtra Parishad and Karnataka Parishad in 1937. Along with these came the Mahila Nav Jivan Mandal which was to contribute active members to the left movement—Pramila Tai, Sarju Behen, Yasoda Ben among others. It had a membership of 2,000, drawn from all the Hindi speaking communities in the state. These organizations helped women to enter public life. Those who joined the Telangana movement were the ones who were more radical and were conscious of the middle and upper class background of these organizations. Yet they continued to work in them and undertake joint action. Pramila Tai says 'in Nav Jivan Mandal we had all ranis and begums—RSS women were also there. Congress women were there. Non-political women were

also there. The main feeling was that we were serving women and that we were serving the national cause.'

It was during this time (in Andhra state, which was also Telugu speaking but was under the Madras Presidency) that the Andhra Mahila Sangham was formed. In the year 1936, the Krishna Zilla Mahila Sangham was formed under Chandra Rajeshwar Rao's guidance. Widow remarriage, divorce and property rights for women were some of the issues that the Sangham dealt with. The Mahila Sangham, unlike the Andhra Maha Sabha in Telangana, also organized peasant women and many members came into the Andhra Communist Party which was at that time the strongest unit of the Communist Party of India. Dr Acchamamba, an important member of the Andhra Mahila Sangham, was later a key figure in the organization of medical help and facilities to those who fought in the Telangana struggle, particularly the women. Her house was a meeting place for progressive political and literary figures.

It would not perhaps be out of place to say a few words about the intellectual climate in Hyderabad in the late thirties. The year 1938 marks the beginning of a new and increased political consciousness among the people, particularly students and youth. The Hyderabad State Congress began the satyagraha movement: in the same year, Osmania University issued a ban on the singing of the *Vandemataram*. The students of Osmania University defied the ban and they were forced to vacate the hostels. Progressive Muslim students of the University expressed solidarity with the Vandemataram movement and resentment at the suppression of the civil liberties of the Hindu community. At the end of the year, those who were opposed to imperialism, fascism and the autocratic rule of the Nizam, and who believed in socialist ideas formed the 'Comrades Association' which was to play an important role in spreading socialist ideas among the youth. Many progressive Muslims courageously opposed the Nizam's rule and became members of the Association. Several of them were to join the Telangana struggle and lead the movement. From 1939–42 when the Communist Party was banned, the Comrades Association functioned as a platform for the communists. It ceased to exist in 1944, by which time most of the communist leaders were actively engaged in the Telangana struggle.

The 1930s also saw a proliferation of progressive nationalist literature. Newspapers like *Payam* and *Rayat* propagated ideals of

freedom, democracy and secularism. The monthly magazine *Nigar* under the editorship of Niaz Fatehpuri opposed superstition and religious fanaticism and was anti-imperialist in its ideology. Several other progressive journals such as *Jamia, Parchum, Nayadab* inspired youth all over the country. Some of this progressive literature, along with Communist Party literature, began to slowly find its way into the Nizam's state. Young people, particularly the student community, were deeply influenced by this. The All Hyderabad Students Union was formed in 1939. It built up a democratic student movement and permitted into its fold individuals of different political leanings as well as organizations working for the nationalist cause. At a time when women students at Osmania University could attend classes only if they were sitting behind a *chilman* (thin bamboo curtain) there were three women members in the Executive Council of AHSU. This was no mean achievement at a time when the social constraints on Muslim women were so severe that those who gave up the purdah were called *kaffirs*. So pervasive was the influence of the ruling Muslim culture, that even upper and middle class Hindu women were brought behind purdah.

The development of the struggle

The Andhra Maha Sabha, as we noted earlier, gave an organizational form to the people's resentment against the autocratic rule of the Nizam and their anger at the deprivation of even simple liberties. Under the left leadership of the AMS, this developed into an armed struggle against the oppressive feudal system and the armed fundamentalist militia of the Nizam—the Razakars. The struggle continued in some areas for nearly three years after the Police Action in 1948 and the integration of the Nizam's state into the Indian Union.

The Andhra Maha Sabha was initially only an assemblage of people with different views, united in the assertion of the socio-cultural rights of the Telugu people. The political awareness generated by this focus, however, turned the organization into a political one. Initially, its tone was moderate but when it began to pass resolutions on civil liberties and to push political demands, the Nizam's government banned all discussions on political and social issues. It was then decided to introduce resolutions on peasant

issues in the third annual conference of the AMS. These resolutions helped gain the support of the rich peasantry for the revolutionary struggles of the coming years. Following the Government of India Act 1935, elected Congress governments came to power in British India. This increased the unrest in the princely states and demands for similar reforms were made in Kashmir, Mysore etc. In the Nizam's state, attempts to establish a State Congress to fight for responsible government began in the face of threats by the Nizam's government to ban such an organization. Many communist leaders also participated in the satyagraha and courted arrest. Students left colleges in large numbers and participated in the Vandemataram movement. The Tablig (conversion into Islam) movement begun by the Ittehad-ul-Mussalmeen (an organization representing extreme Muslim fundamentalism) in order to increase their strength, was resented and countered by the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Maha Sabha. At the same time peasant struggles against forced labour and exorbitant taxes were gaining strength in the Bhongir district of Nalgonda.

When the second war broke out in 1939, the Communist Party was banned in British India. It was at this time, however, that the Communist Party was formed in Hyderabad with the support of the Andhra Communist Party; but members continued to function within the AMS because of the general political situation and the ban on the Party in the rest of the country. Soon, the rift between the moderates and militants in the Andhra Maha Sabha became more open, particularly after the seventh conference in 1940 and ended in a split at the historic Bhongir conference in 1944. The moderates separated and formed a rival AMS which functioned for two to three years and later merged with the State Congress. Under the leadership of the communists the AMS assumed the character of a mass organization. Thousands joined the organization and were given receipts: this is why the organization was initially called the Chitti (receipt) Sangham. For the people a receipt denoting membership of the organization meant the right to oppose vetti, to refuse to pay taxes, to punish those who collected them and those who opposed the Sangham. In Mundrai, the *lambadas* resisted the attempts of the landlord to illegally occupy their lands. The celebrated Chakali Ailamma's standing crops were threatened by the landlord's *goondas*. Her husband and two sons were in prison at the time, implicated in the Palakurthi Conspiracy

Case. Seven hundred volunteer squads from other areas, as well as hostel students from Suryapet came and cut the crop, took it to her house and guarded it. The struggle necessitated the taking up of arms—not guns but *lathis*, slings and stones. The Sangham now came to be called the Gutapala (batons) Sangham. Volunteer squads were formed and trained in using these weapons. Women used pounding sticks and chilli powder. Ailamma's bid for the right to cultivate her land is often considered the beginning of the armed struggle.

In 1945, the AMS conference at Khammam gave a call for the overthrow of the Nizam's autocratic regime and the feudal *jagirdari* system. By November 1946 the decision for armed resistance was taken and village defence squads were formed. Struggles against the landlords of Suryapet and Jangaon were intensified. Kadivendi became the battle ground in July 1946 with thousands of people marching against the notorious Visnuru Ramachandra Reddy. Doddi Komarayya laid down his life in the struggle. Thousands of people gathered and elected the first People's Court to try the culprits. Between 1939 and 45 the communists organized Sanghams that took up specific issues such as *vetti*, compulsory levy etc. The Sanghams insisted that no more than what had been fixed as levy could be collected. When the crops were bad the levy was not paid. The increased tensions in the rural areas also increased the political consciousness of the peasants and everywhere there was a new awakening. 1946 was a year of intensified struggles between the landlords and the Sanghams. The Nizam's government, openly supporting the landlords, banned the Communist Party and the AMS. Most leaders went underground and the Party office was shifted to Vijayawada in October 1946. Realizing the inability of the police to put down the people's struggles, the Nizam attributed this failure to the inefficiency of the Prime Minister (who was the Nawab of Chatari), and replaced him with Sir Mirza Ismail. The new Prime Minister supplied the police with sten guns and bren guns which replaced the *lathis* they had so far carried. Equipped with the new weapons the police increased their reign of terror in collusion with landlords. In Aknoor and Machireddipalli several women were raped. On Gandhiji's request, Padmaja Naidu[2]

[2] Padmaja Naidu, daughter of Sarojini Naidu was a source of inspiration for many women. Although the Congress did not make any serious attempt at building a

enquired into the incident and submitted a report.

On India's becoming independent in 1947, the Nizam refused to join the Indian Union and his attempt to erect Hyderabad as an independent state created a new situation in the state. The Razakars[3]—the para-military wing of the Ittehad-ul-Mussalmeen—struck terror in the city and in the rural areas. The communists and the Congress converged in the anti-Razakar movement, both using their own tactics. The Communist Party organization was remodelled to suit the changed circumstances. The call for armed struggle and secret organizational work was given. Village defence committees were formed. *Dalams* (squads) of armed women and men were formed and trained in Vijayawada. A medical attendant or doctor and a political propagandist were part of the squads. The support of the Andhra communists to the Telangana struggle came in many ways. Hundreds received training in guerilla warfare, gave medical aid to the wounded and the sick, and collected funds through cultural activities. Arms were captured by raiding police stations and landlords' houses. The incessant raids by the Razakars and the strong oppositional struggles put up by the *dalams* and peasantry became regular features. In several villages of Warangal, guerilla fights ended in the defeat of the landlords and Razakars. Land was seized and distributed among the peasantry. In Karimnagar, Sircilla and Huzurabad districts, *dalams* were formed and police stations raided. The guerilla struggle spread to several villages in Nalgonda, Warangal, Khammam, Karimnagar, Medak and Adilabad. The administrative machinery of the Nizam came to a standstill in

women's movement, Padmaja Naidu's role in the political life of Hyderabad was significant. Her house was a meeting place for young people and progressive intellectuals. She was the president of the Swadeshi League and offered satyagraha. She was also the editor of *Onward*—a journal that advocated responsible government and social reforms.

[3] The Razakars were the para-military wing of the Ittehad-ul-Mussalmeen. The latter was established in 1927 at a time when political consciousness was growing rapidly in Hyderabad, to protect the political and cultural rights of the Muslims and to perpetuate their status. It gained in strength and stature between 1939 and 40 when Nawab Bahadur Yar Jung became its President. Every Muslim was to raise the slogan of 'An-al Malik' (We are the rulers). A plan for raising a corps of volunteers materialized in 1940. The volunteers were armed with a sword and a dagger and senior volunteers with muzzle-loading guns, were to wear a khaki uniform. In 1946, Kasim Razvi took over as the president of Majlis and the organization became increasingly militant when the decision to give them regular military training was taken. Under Razvi's leadership the Razakars were notorious for their cruelty.

nearly 4000 villages. In its place were established the Gram Rajyas. *Vetti* was abolished and 10 to 12 lakh acres of land distributed. Unpaid debts were cancelled. Tenants were given full tenancy rights. Toddy tappers got back rights over trees. Untouchability was abolished and a new social awareness became visible. Armed women defended themselves against the Razakars. In Penukonda in Huzurnagar taluk 200 women, armed with whatever primitive instruments they could grab, chased the police out of the village.[4] In Appajipet[5] in Nalgonda, the entire womenfolk of the village encircled the police van carrying away three Andhra Maha Sabha workers, attacked the police with wooden pestles and pots of chilli powder and finally forced them to release the leaders. Women were imprisoned for supporting the peasantry against the Rajah of Challapalli's estate in Tullapalem village.[6] While the Telangana struggle was on, the Andhra peasantry was engaged in similar struggles against the landlords in many places. The Andhra Mahila Sangham entered the fight against Section 144 and for its right to exist and function as the democratic organization of Andhra women. They extended material and moral support to their sisters in Telangana.

A new turn was given to the Telangana struggle, when the Indian government took the decision to send the Union Army into the state, as the Nizam refused to merge with India after independence in August 1947. Under Clause 7 of the Indian Independence Bill, 1947, the suzerainty of the British crown over the Indian princely states lapsed, and with it all treaties and agreements in force between the rulers of Indian states and the British King. The princely states were given the option to accede to the Indian Union or to the newly created state of Pakistan, or remain independent. The Nizam refused to accede to India and proclaimed independence. What was called the Police Action in September 1948 was actually an army action. The Nizam's army surrendered within a few hours and the Razakars were disbanded. The armed might of the Indian army was now turned against the communists. Sardar Patel, the Union Home Minister, an avowed anti-communist, swore to wipe out the Party. Repression increased in the Andhra area as well. The new State Government

[4] *People's Age*, December 14, 1947.
[5] *People's Age*, April 1, 1948.
[6] *People's Age*, April 11, 1948.

banned the Party. The second congress of the CPI held at Calcutta in February 1948 had come to the conclusion that conditions for armed revolution were ripe in India following Ranadive's thesis of insurrection to seize power. Later, in 1950, the 'Andhra Thesis', which followed the Chinese path, argued that protracted struggle was to be carried on, and was accepted as an alternative line. Telangana was called the Yenan of India. The plan was that from the liberated areas, the struggle was to extend to other parts. Soon the guerilla struggle intensified notwithstanding a more sophisticated and better equipped Indian army; thousands of cadres were killed and it became increasingly difficult to find shelter. Those who had earlier readily given shelter, particulary the rich peasantry, were no longer willing to support the movement as the earlier focal point—the Nizam—had been overthrown. The *dalams* retreated into the forest areas of Amarabad, Nallamalai and Mulug. The Party organized the tribals to fight the forest officials and money lenders who subjected them to exploitation. However, in the face of increased repression by the Indian army, the reconstituted Politbureau of the Party took the decision in 1951 to call off the movement after prolonged discussions.

The Telangana struggle undoubtedly brought several gains to the peasantry. Many who received land in the land distribution progamme of the Party continued to own it and their tenancy rights were guaranteed by a Tenancy Act, brought about as a result of the struggle. In fact, this Act has been hailed as the most progressive legislation on land in the country. Above all, *vetti chakiri* was abolished. The cultural and ideological suppression of women in the system being qualitatively different, the abolition of *vetti* and the *jagirdari* system also brought about a qualitative change in their lives. Somakka of Vempati says: 'If we helped the communists, it was for our own good. People got lands and got rid of levy. Those days, could we sit and talk to you like this? Today we can do that. If we dressed up well, if we put kumkum they used to say "what does she think of herself"?' Yet, this is not to say that all the problems were solved. The fact that women did not get land, in the land distribution programme except when they were widows, indicates that they were not counted as individuals. With the entry of the Indian army and eventual withdrawal of the struggle, the landlords returned and a new administrative set up replaced the *jagirdari* system. Neither the problem of poverty nor

the caste system were solved. Yet the rural ethos had changed in the struggle areas.

For those who came from the middle classes, the gains were perhaps much less tangible. The struggle itself brought them out of the four walls of their homes. Kausalya who comes from a middle peasant family, sitting in her courtyard in Vempati said: 'We did not know what was behind this wall. We could never go out. But now we go out and look to our agricultural work. There is no more *ghosha* here.' Women from the city did not come in as large numbers as from the villages. This may have also been because the spillover from the nationalist movement into the left movement came at a later stage, i.e., in the mid-forties, by which time the infrastructure for their participation was created by the peasant movements in the rural areas.

The *dalams* and Sanghams maintained strict discipline in every respect. When issues such as wife-beating or child marriage came up, the Sanghams called the people concerned, held open debates and resolved matters. Severe punishments were inflicted on those members of *dalams* who misbehaved with women. In at least one instance death was the sentence of the people's court. Shanker, a member of the *dalam* was accused of rape and misappropriation of party funds and faced the firing squad. This was hailed by the people as the correct line of action.

The struggle lasted as long as it did due to the support it received from the people, who saw in the Sangham and the *dalam* the only way out of the oppressive *jagirdari* system. The peasantry constituted the backbone of the struggle. Women stood forth facing the enemy—the Razakars, the *goondas* of the landlords and later the Indian army, unravelling a whole hidden strength, taking on any role that the situation called for. They evolved collective forms of resistance which were spontaneous and untaught. Latchamma of Vempati recalls:

> My husband was scared, but I did not listen to him. I joined the Sangham. After all what could we do alone? The bearded Amin was a terror. He used to make the men run on their knees. One *komti* woman was raped. Many were raped. In fact we used to stay together and escape together—pretend that an old woman was dead, or someone had delivered a baby or a girl had matured. We never revealed to the police or Razakar the whereabouts of the Sangham.

The fear of rape and sexual torture did not deter women from keeping secrets and protecting the Sangham and *dalam* members. There are instances when women were forced to give up their little babies for the safety of the *dalams*. Women were couriers passing on secret messages, often disguised as boys. Almost the entire burden of finding shelters and running the dens in the city fell on women. Those who were in *dalams* wielding guns, few as they were, faced the situation with all its inherent problems—material as well as problems of man-woman relations and male hierarchies. To see their role as 'supportive', to make distinctions that state that women supplied the stones and men used the slings is to create precisely the distinctions and hierarchies that make women invisible.

The Party was unable to evolve any policy with regard to women. While they were admittedly indispensable to the movement, the Party was also reluctant to see them as more than merely 'supportive'. A Party document tracing the growth of the movement in various villages—Mumdrai, Palakurthi etc.—says:

> It has become common that the whole women population too participated either in processions or meetings along with men folk. But for a long time the party made few efforts to organize them separately. They assisted their men folk with stones when the men folk fought with slings against police. They supplied pots full of water and thus did their part in the struggle. In some villages, it is worth noting that veiled women from the rich peasant class also participated. We, however, did not bring them, along with the men folk, into the struggles on general issues or give them practice in self-defence. We always viewed their problems as a separate issue. Due to this attitude, we only succeeded in making them sympathetic to the movement, but could not involve them as a direct force in the fight.

Ch. Rajeshwar Rao, member of the CPI said: 'We praised women when they came, but we did not do anything to encourage them to come, because their protection was a problem. They fought boldly, organized shelters, brought food etc. The party made no special efforts to attract them. Many women in fact wanted to join.' While the movement did, to a certain extent, break the social barriers between men and women, it is also true that women were seen as mainly responsible for its problems. Swarajyam who is a legend of the Telangana struggle says:

> Our pain was not so much because of the difficulties we had to face but because of the scandals. When husbands were in jail and women were in forests after retreat from the plain areas, some used our mistakes. We had to bear the brunt.

When the movement was called off, women were asked to go back to their families. What did this mean to women? Brij Rani asks "What do you think it means, to wield weapons in the struggle and sit before sewing machines now?"

Writing about Women in People's Struggles

It is a chastening experience, as one begins to reflect on the question of women's history, to think back to one's school text-books. Etched into our memories are the beautiful Mumtaz Mahal who moved Shah Jehan to build the Taj Mahal, and the brave Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi who fought to retain her husband's kingdom. The only women who crossed those pages were the women great men loved, or those who through some accident of circumstance, could enter fields customarily reserved for upper class men.

Women's history as it has taken shape today grows out of the sudden recognition, precipitated by the women's movement, that such history not only marginalizes women but mythologizes them into the terms of a male-centred world; indeed, that the life and work of the majority of women have been systematically obscured by histories which have purported to be factual or neutral. By and large this is as true of social history as it is of orthodox political history. Women's history, then, is an intervention: its intent more political than archival. It is an assertion that women have a history although that history has been distorted, even erased by the biases that pervade our culture and our scholarship. It is significant that much of this work has been done either outside the university or on its fringes. As we search out and record the histories in this book, we set out to reclaim a past and celebrate a lineage of resistance and growth, for to be deprived of a past is to inherit an impoverished present and a future sealed off from change.

In Europe and America the very earliest work in the field was simply compensatory. The task was perceived as having to locate, and place alongside the great men of history, the great women who had been 'left out'. Historians met with such success—women whose lives and whose work had been forgotten (or suppressed) were 'found' in surprising numbers in every walk of life—that

attention was initially deflected from the fact that the resulting history remained a history of exceptional women. If we were to attempt a compensatory history of the Telangana Struggle, for instance, we would have located women who had acquired distinction within the movement. We would have recorded their achievements, stressing their heroism, their creativity, their quality as fighters and organizers; in other words, their claim to a place with the men.

Though the conscientizing force of such efforts is undeniable, the critique provided by compensatory history is obviously not radical enough. True, it forced traditional history to extend itself and accommodate more women. But the cultural biases, the political commitments and the disciplinary strategies that excluded women in the first place remained unquestioned, and consequently intact but invisible, taken for granted. Women's absence from history, compensatory practices indicate, is an omission which can be set right with a little goodwill and application. But women as a whole are still hidden in these histories. Obviously women's history is no more an 'addition' to mainstream history than labour or social history is an addition to the old political histories.

In India women's history has developed in a somewhat different mode. The earliest efforts at what may seriously be regarded as women's history were contributory histories. The emphasis in such studies shifts from documenting the achievements of notable women to describing and assessing the quality and extent of women's participation in, say, the social reform movement or the satyagraha struggles. The questions that are asked now are: what did women, singly and as a whole, contribute to the movement; what was their status in it; and sometimes even, how did they continue to be oppressed within it. Most contributory history is celebrative and has a definite morale-raising function in relation to the present. There is, of course, the danger even in such contributory studies, that the new history will remain essentially compensatory and uncritical. For one thing, in most contributory histories the movement in question and its significance for a history of women, are taken for granted. Women are regarded as contributing to something that exists/existed independent of them. Further, their 'contributions' are often analysed and judged not according to their value or importance for women, but according to their 'use' for the movement in question. Renu Chakravarthy's *Communists in Indian Women's Movement 1940–1950* (New Delhi:

PPH, 1980) is a good example of a contributory history that remains uncritical. The book is a treasure house of information as it is of description and narrative that have not been put on record elsewhere. The refrain that runs through her account of women in the Telangana Movement is that they 'fought the Razakars and the Nizam's police and later on the Indian Army, *standing shoulder to shoulder with their menfolk.*' (p. 124–5, our emphasis. Compare also pp. 127, 129, 130, 132, 140 and so on.) The account moves from major battle to major battle, telling us 'old people and women and children were supplying stones and slings to their menfolk.' (p. 125); or that 'the women would surround the lorries and would not allow them to proceed, demanding that the men be set free.' (p. 127); or that 'women stood behind them (the men)' (p. 129); or that Swarajyam and Arutla Kamala Devi 'even' fought with rifles (p. 130). The implicit acknowledgement of men as central and male action as norm apart, it is quite evident that this history is finally what the text itself admits to in its conclusion: a tally of the ways in which 'the Telangana Struggle got sustenance from different sections of town and country people,'' (p. 135). In other words, it is an account, not so much of communists in the women's movement, as of women in the communist movement.

This is not surprising, for the limits of the author's understanding of the women's movement are explicit: 'in this great struggle', she writes of Telangana, 'women showed their fortitude and in the process liberated themselves from feudal chains that had bound them down for centuries' (p. 135); there is no room for problems or questions here, and the tone of conviction rings through the authorial narrative. This is probably also why the author can quote Lenin's 1921 dictum with such wholehearted approval in the Introduction. 'The Bolshevist Soviet Revolution', Lenin had claimed 'is eradicating the oppression and inequalities of women more thoroughly than any other party or revolution in the world has dared to' (p. 3). But neither in Chakravarthy writing so many years after, nor in Lenin himself do we find the awareness that a revolution for women demands a change that is qualitative and not merely quantitative, or that a qualitative change for women does not just follow as a result of a struggle centered elsewhere. Women's chains are not just feudal.

Take for example a very important (for women) campaign that Chakravarthy documents. Amidst all the accounts of pitched battle and of death that scar these pages is one description of a

Sangham-initiated action to get the local authorities to construct lavatories for women. Though the author admits that it was one of the 'biggest and most popular' campaigns and that it 'immensely popularised the Sangam' with women, it is given to us as an example of the 'small and trifling', 'local' (p. 138) problems that the women's organizers had to deal with. Nowhere in this account is there the awareness, let alone an appreciation, of the new sites for struggle or the new forms of political behaviour that emerge most clearly in the battle against women's oppression. And even when the problems that haunt women's lives are so clearly brought to the fore, they are obscured and marginalized by authoritative political interpretations. As is pointed out in the Afterword, patriarchal norms and categories continue to haunt such accounts (as they do women's self conceptions).

Rarely in such a contributory history do we achieve the recentering of knowledge that a women's history demands. Nonetheless, the very fact that in such history women are considered as a group, and not as separate individuals, and the awareness, common in such histories, that women of different classes were involved in different activities and contributed in different ways, make for an important advance in women's historiography.

P. Sundarayya's chapter on women in *History of Telangana Peoples' Struggle* (New Delhi), can also be classified as a contributory history though it is in many ways quite different from Chakravarthy's account. His is the most careful account we have so far of women in the movement. It records in some detail the resilience, the selflessness and the heroism of women who fought in the squads or rose to positions of importance in the organization. He speaks of the courage of women who provided shelter, suffered in the repression and sacrificed their lives for the cause; he writes of sisters, wives and mothers, who supported the men in the family and moved into the Party and of the hundreds of women who were part of the resistance. The list of 'martyrs' includes 20 women who were raped and killed. It is not an exhaustive record, neither does it claim to be one. But it does give us a sense of the range and quality of what women were perceived as doing for the movement. As important as the specific documentation is the tone in which the account is given. One cannot miss the warmth and the obvious pride with which he speaks of these fellow fighters.

In no sense can we regard Sundarayya's documentation as a full-fledged women's history, but what gives the account its special distinction is the critical dimensions that emerge through the narrative. Here we get not only a celebration of women's contributions but also the awareness that women did have special difficulties which the organization was not able to deal with. Unlike many of the other leaders we interviewed, Sundarayya is conscious that the Party did not respond adequately to the enormous challenge women posed and—more important—he regrets it. Take for instance this comment:

> When we asked our squads, when so many women are coming to you, why did you not organise them into women's organisations, they answered that most of the women were mothers with children and as such it was difficult to recruit them into women's organisations that could effectively function. (p. 514)

The excuse hangs limp and obviously does not satisfy Sundarayya any more than it does us, though there is no critique here of the way the problem of children and of reproduction is simply transposed into the problems of women.

An important feature of Sundarayya's account is a long extract from a letter, written by Narasamma, a young woman from a poor peasant family who, we are told:

> joined the squads in 1950 and was an active cadre with good initiative, [who] tried to carry out the tasks allotted to her by the Party and sought ways and means to accomplish them successfully. She tried to explain things to the people and kept up their interest and respect. She had great confidence in the Party. She read and made efforts to develop the cadre.

What follows is an extract from a letter she wrote to the Party which is a crucial document for a women's history of the movement. Sundarayya obviously regards Narasamma's comments as trenchant. She writes:

> during the Nizam-Razakar period, *we* tried to do everything and did not develop people's initiative to do things on their own though they were moving on a big scale. The habit and practice continued after the Union armies came and we justified it saying that the people could not move because of repression, so we must ourselves do the tasks even if the people did not participate.

It continues:

> You must coach up cadres properly, even if it means a few more days' delay, so that they can go to the villages with a clear understanding. Especially you must coach them as to how to escape the enemy. With regard to cadre protection, enough precaution and care is not being taken. You must give us books which we can understand. You must take more pains to find such material for us.

Later she goes on to say:

> We women are still being looked upon with the old outlook, that we are inferior. Any slip or mistake we commit, our leaders come down very heavily on us. It becomes a subject of open gossip and scandal. We must be guided and improved and not derided. If we move a little freely, we are watched with suspicion. Why have you not allowed any woman to participate in actual guerrilla raids on the enemy?

It is significant that Narasamma's observations about the harassment of women and the double standards that prevailed go hand in hand with her strikingly articulate statements about the vital need for education and democracy for everyone—not just for women—even in the thick of the battle.

Sundarayya often acknowledges that the organization may have taken decisions that were too harsh: 'Comrade Padma' was asked to give her baby away so that her husband could go to the forests—which meant that she would also have to go underground. He writes:

> I had always nursed a feeling of guilt after that suggestion of mine. Could I not have taken the mother and her two children some other place where Padma could have lived with her husband and children after his return? At that time, we were thinking of years of armed struggle, till we achieved final liberation. All who were capable went to the forests, and others were to settle in jobs and places to search out new sources of living and do whatever they could for the cause of revolution! . . . But the Telangana Armed Struggle was withdrawn within one year after this. It was rankling in my heart. . . . (p. 353).

Obviously the main sentiment here is pain at having broken up the family and separated the parents from the children. But, although this could be reading a little too much into these lines, there is also the sense that the whole question of children (indeed, one can say, the whole question of sexuality and reproduction) had not been

addressed adequately. And that was a grave omission in such a movement.

A history of this kind obviously goes beyond a compensatory history. But as we pointed out earlier, the movement still stands in the foreground of inquiry and acquires a solid positivistic weight. It is regarded as objective fact, not a human event. Women are not seen as making history, or as having shaped the movement, only as having contributed to it. The ways in which women were affected by the movement, their struggles for survival and the growth (or the stunting) of their consciousness, are nearly always depoliticized even when they are not ignored. Earlier we quoted Narasamma's astute comments about organizational priorities and about the harassment of women. In Sundarayya's history (as no doubt, in the movement itself) these statements are quoted, but not seriously absorbed into any analysis of the political issues they faced. Rather, they are somewhat patronisingly recorded as a personal accomplishment: 'I have given this long extract,' he writes, 'just to give an idea of how women cadres were feeling and developing' (p. 348). Comrade Padma's problem—of children—was among the major problems for the struggle. Yet in the discussion it is diluted into a moral problem, a guilt at having violated family happiness. Once again there is no analysis that focuses on it as a political issue that had to be addressed if the movement was serious about women.

If the best of attitudes were blighted by a such a patronizing attitude that effectively dismissed women, it is little wonder that the women often felt used and then cast aside. Or that despite the pride we commented on, there was also the brooding, pervasive sense that women were 'problems'. And as long as the 'problem' was not politicized, as long as its dimensions were not rationally encountered, its contradictions acknowledged, it obviously remained, like other such problems, an embarrassment, accompanied by the barely articulated but powerful wish that it would just go away. A wish that emerged not so much in explicit statement as in the small (and yet not so small) everyday moments of dismissive encounter whose corrosive power women anywhere will recognize. But for us today there is also the chill feeling when we think of what happened to women as a result, and how little, despite the enormous effort recorded in these autobiographical accounts, things have changed. One is humbled and held in awe, by what Pramila Tai calls 'the sheer will power', the mental and psychic strength of women who

came, who persisted, and who worked in the face of this, but like Sugunamma, whose anecdote about Swarajyam we quote later, we are amazed—and disturbed—at how easily they were sent back to their cooking and to sewing machines. To explain this as expediency or necessity on the one hand or as callousness or dishonesty on the part of the leadership on the other, is to reduce it to a moral question and obscure its politics.

On the face of it, our study is also a contributory history. Who were the women who participated in the Telangana People's Struggle, what did they do, what are their experiences, what happened to them when the struggle was withdrawn, where are they today, we ask. Yet there is a crucial difference. Our study embodies a shift in point of view that initiates the movement towards a history that takes women seriously. What is history like when it is seen through the eyes of women and judged by the values they define, what were their experiences, what was the movement for them? The task obviously requires new concepts and new categories, but it also demands that we locate new sources and fashion new methodological tools. There was some documentary evidence we could draw on—a few references in newspapers and party documents, odd entries in police records, but hardly anything that would recover a history of women on the scale that would do the subject justice. What we did have though, were living voices that helped us recreate the past as women themselves had experienced it. Many of the women who were active in the movement are alive, some of them still active. Each time we met and talked with one, we heard of others, in other places, even of villages where all the women had been involved in one way or another. The new information gleaned by word of mouth gave us a more accurate idea of (the grossly underestimated) *extent* of women's participation. But the real value of these oral testimonies lies in their ability to capture the *quality* of women's lives. Through them we are able to document experiences that traditional history would have ignored or even dismissed, to appreciate the issues as they appeared to the actors at the time, and set their responses and their struggles against the backdrop of that understanding.

In this history women are not spoken about, they speak for themselves. As listeners we had also to learn how to lay our urgencies temporarily aside and allow this emphasis on the *telling*,

as against the *asking*, to emerge. Slowly, as we heard the life stories we began to build a sense of what the movement was for women; a sense of the pain, the isolation, the courage, the ingenuity, the creative brilliance of their lives.

What could be simpler, one might imagine, than asking those whose stories had not been told, to tell them. But we were constantly reminded that speaking thus, from below, needs courage. The women we interviewed were opening doors on their private lives, often drawing on areas of experience that had never been exposed to scrutiny before. And in doing so they were challenging centuries of silence.

These life-stories were transcribed from tape recordings of interviews, and then edited. Often one senses, as one listens (inevitably some, though by no means all, of the nuance and cadence of the spoken is lost in the written) how language had to be stretched to reach out to the as yet unspoken and the still unspeakable areas of experience. We have to learn, as we read these life stories, to listen for what another oral historian has called the 'language of silence', straining to be heard. We need to understand the pauses, the waverings, the incoherence, the questions that are avoided just as much as we need to 'hear' the real import of obsessive repetitions. When Dudala Salamma returns with the urgency of a clock that must strike the hour to the pension that never came, she speaks not only of money, but also of a life that was given and a vision that was betrayed. She speaks without the graphic directness of Priyamvada: 'Our hopes were like an egg crushed in the hand,' but as clearly and as disturbingly.

Public or 'macro' history has an established language, a rhythm, a transparency that comes from being legitimate, uncontested, sanctioned by authority. In fact it is so powerful that, like ideology, it has the capacity to distort the meaning of experience and blunt or even erase memories that go against its grain. We gradually forget what we are not allowed or encouraged to remember. In many of the accounts the struggle to capture and assert knowledge and experience that was in no way 'public' or legitimate is evident. But we have to listen carefully to grasp and appreciate it. We need therefore to treasure and value the 'little incidents' that survived the reductive balm of public memory. When Pramila Tai tells us of the pain of being dismissed as a woman when she voiced a political opinion, or of her hurt when the Party refused, despite the large

number of contacts she had here, to provide her shelter or allow her to stay in Hyderabad, these are not 'mere details', but important pointers to dimensions of experience that had no public sanction, let alone political credence. The accounts are open, exploratory, tentative. Yet once our ears are tuned to the subtler rhythms and the more searching implications of these histories, and the visions that gleam in their strategies, the monotone of public histories sounds dull, even brash; their statements true but limited. For women's worlds, however hidden they are, are meshed in with men's. And the insights they provide have radical implications for our understanding of a society comprised both of men and of women. If we are to move towards the history of humankind and therefore to the possibility of its future, we need not just to place women's history alongside that of men, but attend with humility and eagerness to the revaluations, reformulations and reorientation that it demands.

For us as a women' group searching out our past, oral history has a particular appropriateness. Though women have traditionally been marginalized in written cultures, they have always told stories and sung songs. These are often stories or songs that uphold the norms of a culture and serve to maintain the hold of its ideology. But they are also stories of those who resisted power and fought injustice. For each other, women have always had stories that never saw the light of the more public modes of patriarchal cultures. Traditionally mothers pass knowledge and expertise down to their daughters verbally. Fine-tuned skills of resistance and survival, ways of nurturing physical and mental health and the enduring support in times of trouble have passed down this alternate line. Teaching and learning in this parallel culture is intimate, personalized, practical; the knowledge communicated nearly always about survival and resistance in a shared oppression. There were many moments in these conversations when we touched on these notes. Sometimes we were asked to switch the tape recorder off as the 'still unmentionable' questions of (women's) politics were discussed.

Friends who read the manuscript were surprised to find that the 'major' and 'public' issues of exploitation and repression hardly featured in these accounts. There seemed such a cleavage, they said, between the movement they had heard and read about, or even the history recorded in our Introduction and what comes up in these

oral histories. What does this mean, they asked. Did it happen because you did not ask them about it (in other words, was it a result of our biases?) or does it mean that women were not concerned with these political issues? The comment is astute for it puts its finger right on the spot where certain crucial questions converge. Let us deal with the problem of our questions first. It is true that we asked, in the main, for the story of these women's lives. We wanted to know about them and what they did, and we wanted the stories to emerge with the emphases that had come out of their own experiences. 'Tell us about your life,' we said, 'start from when you were born, tell us how you grew up, what things were like at that time, how you came into the movement and so on.' We did not say, 'tell us about the Telangana Armed Struggle.' But while it is true that history only answers the questions which are put to it, it by no means follows that we get the answers we expect. Initially we too were surprised that we did not hear more about forced labour and the cruelty of the landlords, about purdah and rape. Rather, we heard about problems with marriage and of brothers helping sisters leave the family and join the movement. We heard about relationships, about nurturing and child-bearing, about their joys and their tensions, as much, or perhaps more, than we heard about political action in the traditional sense. We heard almost nothing about planning or decision making, or of macro-political or tactical problems being discussed.

There are (at least) two factors at play here. One relates to the context in which the question was asked. Though we did not, when we set out on the interview, explicitly say, tell us about your life *as a woman*, yet we went as members of a women's organization writing a history of women in the movement. It was this orientation together with the emphasis on the 'subjective' as against the 'objective' that helped create this important change in emphasis: almost unconsciously they spoke to us as women and about women in the movement. And as we sat together, and they talked at length in an atmosphere of informal intimacy, (the interviews sometimes took several hours) the areas that came into focus were those where a great deal of the politics of the women's question is actually located: the family, the policing of personal life and of sexuality, child-bearing, nuturing, relationships (with men, with other women) the movement as a place of refuge, a sanctioned or legitimate opportunity for escape from the confinement of the

family and of womanhood, the microdynamics of oppression and so on.

It is difficult to believe that the women were not aware of the 'public' issues involved. (Though, as other interviews with male leaders show, even for them the emphasis shifted in the thick of the struggle from the major issues for which they were fighting, to battle tactics.) But what becomes clearly apparent in the narratives is the whole parallel realm that absorbed women's efforts and their attention. It was a realm that lay outside the scope of political understanding at that time and consequently one in which they had to struggle alone, without a critical perspective. Priyamvada actually speaks of it: 'we were only individuals,' she said. But that note runs through the other life-stories too. Here too women carried the double burden of a (mostly unrecognized) 'private' struggle tacked on to the public one. By and large this problem of the two struggles, one visible, the other hidden, continues to exist in Party organizations even today, just as it continues to cripple women's efforts. To say this however, is not detract from the immense sense of possibility the movement did provide for the women the leadership chose to include—but that brings us to another dimension of the 'private' struggle. We discuss that in the Afterword.

As the theory and practice of socialist feminism today indicates, such a focus on the private might give us many more clues about the continuing vitality, not only of the structures that oppress women, but of feudalism and capitalism, than debates on the law of value (useful and illuminating though these may be). We could go a step further. Our understanding of socialism too might be more penetrating and less abstract if we understood it thus from below, looking at its secret languages, its silences, its unarticulated values, its points of focus as well as the dissonances in its cognitive style, perhaps even the needs and desires it still nourishes, the substratum of fear and ambition it draws on. To what extent have these broken from the largely feudal moulds into which we are set? And when these are broken, what do we have to replace them? Has enough effort been put into the tenacular details that go into making a new socialist culture? Or do our imaginations continue to draw on a worn-out feudal coin?

Though oral history has proved an important source for women's, or for that matter, people's history, we should not gloss

over its very definite limitations. We generally tend to think of experience or memory or even the telling of a life story, as spontaneous and unmediated, concerned with the concrete reality of life and not with the abstraction of theory or the forms of fiction. But as anyone actually engaged in recording life-histories soon finds out, neither memory nor experience is exempt from ideological processing. What we remember is, by and large, though not entirely, culturally sanctioned (even those memories we preserve in the secret recesses of our minds are ideological in that they are what is socially tabooed). Hidden conventions and models shape the 'fiction' through which we grasp and project our lives. There is a striking awareness of this problem in Kamalamma's story. After one of the few extended accounts we have about the vicious forms of feudal oppression that were operative at the time, she declares, 'It was because of the Leninist party . . . that I knew at least this much. My sister has forgotten everything.' Kamalamma is aware both of the ideological filter that determined memory and the power of critical analysis to rouse and establish, what is, in relation to the dominant form, a counter memory. At sixteen Acchamamba must have been one of the world's first barefoot doctors. She was hardly literate, but she learnt how to treat illnesses, suture, clean and dress wounds, organize balanced diets out of strange meats and vegetables that were available and attend to medical problems in the villages around. The medical and administrative knowledge she built up could well have provided a ministry of health with a model for our country. Yet her life story is composed mainly of bears and lions, attack and escape. The problem of sharing the food in the squad in a way that would ensure she wasn't criticized finally appears more important than all the expertise she gathered. This is a problem we have to face. How do we evaluate women's work, when not just the official records, but the women themselves, continually make distinctions that devalue and marginalize their importance?

The question of experience has always been thorny one for Marxism. The spirit of Marxism is critical and concerned with the totality of social relations, while experience (or so its critics would argue) privileges one point of view, ignoring the wider determinations at work. It substitutes descriptions for explanation; it is not conscious of its ideological formation and so on. Yet there is no denying that experience speaks with a warmth, a richness and a

communicative power that no amount of cold analysis can substitute for. Further, that it is finally the experience of the oppressed and exploited in which contradictions and possibilities as yet unimagined by theory are at work and make political action and change possible.

It is true that we have to be aware of the ideological context in which oral testimonies are produced. But this context is no more uniform in its determination than the oral history itself is. We can, as we argued earlier, hear the questioning, the wavering even the outright rejection of explanations as we read against the grain of the text's volubility and listen for the gaps, the hesitancies, the silences, the evasions. In other words, attend as much to what the stories reveal, as what they say. But that is not all. This history creates a place (won both politically and theoretically) where experiences that had no legitimacy in other accounts can be heard and their implications searched. Writing it has been a process of discovery: not only of the limits of traditional historiography, but of the possibilities that emerge as we recentre our scholarship. There is for us as we think this question through, the knowledge that history as it is written now may well turn out to be the history of a sub-group.

Chityala Ailamma

My name is Chityala Ailamma. We are known as the people from Chityala. My husband was nobody. . . my sons, they too are nobody. Wherever it is and whatever it is, it is my name that is heard first. They keep coming, always, the people from the Sangham.

As soon as they came, the bulls were tethered to the carts and made ready. But M. Muthyam from Isnur (Visnur) arrived. There was a scuffle. Kattule Somayya was caught in that scuffle. In the evening they came back to compromise. Who knew such a [terrible] thing would happen after that. oh! . . . The whole of Isnur came to know. . .. That Narankayya was teaching at Saradamba's house. Listen, let me tell you, the musclemen with their stout sticks had all arrived. Isaka Naligadu, the clerk, Abba Salim and that Guttalam Ramreddy–they wrought havoc. Believe me, they wrought such havoc, turned everything upside down. . . We had put up cattle sheds. They tore them down. We ploughed and we worked the land but they ran roughshod over our labour. That bearded fellow–they took away the seven acres he had ploughed. They took the dry lands, they took away the wet lands. They took all three of us, mother and sons, all three away. They harassed us but the people from Nirmala, from Begarapu, from Kadendi, from Seetharampuram all came and guarded the house. The house was brimming with grain. Yes. . . there were ten whole measures of paddy. . . even as we were harassed, they all came and guarded us. They lived with us for three or four months. I begged in the village for food to feed them. I made two pots of buttermilk and when there was nothing else, they would eat the rice with it, my children. When there wasn't enough rice they'd eat a handful of thick porridge with buttermilk. They ate, and they guarded my grain for four months before they left. But even as they left, the *goondas* came. They set fire to the house. They carried away seven whole measures of millet. Eight whole measures of

green *moong* gram were carried away. The sesame I had put aside for crushing, that sesame too was stolen. Who knew this would happen? They carried the sesame all away. As for the pots of *ghee*, as for those pots, they just disappeared. Such beautiful big pots they were and in a second they were broken. Who knew this would happen? They grabbed big clumps of solid ghee and went off, eating all the way. They loaded the carts and took it all away. The house in the village was set on fire.

And then they caught my daughter. They didn't get me, but they caught my daughter. That Jeevanji Narasayya, may his belly thrive, he was the informer. . . oh, listen. . . they butted me with their bayonets and kicked so much. I bled for such a long time that I had to keep changing my clothes. There was one fellow—I don't remember his name. . . that police fellow—ah Simhadri. . . may his belly prosper, he came and abused them and pulled my daughter aside—she was almost dead by then—and set fire to the house. It was such havoc, what can I say. . . not a pot, not a trough, not a bolt. . . they destroyed it all. . . they broke everything and set fire to it . . . they set fire to the east side of the house. As they were setting fire the Motkur Sub-Inspector came, (whether he has borne his fill of children I know not) but he came. He said: how can such a big house just be burnt down and started throwing water on the flames. There was a pot of water and he picked up a broken pot and kept throwing water very quickly. They found a bottle of castor oil. They kept feeding the fire till it rose. They poured castor oil and set fire as they left. He came and put it out. After the ironsmith went, they wrought havoc like this. As they did this the fields we ploughed were lost. . . . As we ploughed the land the *muktadar* had given us, they came and said that the landlord and his wife had given them this land. They drove us wild with their asking. All the while they all said don't do such a thing, don't sow the fields. We gave them ten measures of grain. Then the Visnuri village scribe took them away. They paid us a fine (compensation) of 360 rupees. Although the others said, why have you done it—we thought—well, if he was born of his father, he would not do such a thing, but if he was only born of his uncle then he would—and we remained silent. Lord! as we were ready to plant the seedlings they came again. Again they didn't let us plough. What could we do now? We went to Pedda Mallayya and he took us to the town with him. The landlord was in the town. The

landlord of Chenchu. He was in the Chenchu folks bungalow in Malakpet. He was staying there. We went to that bungalow.

I wandered around twelve courts. . . I salute you, I beg of you. I wandered all over the town. *Aiyya*—it was all kinds of places that they took me to. . . I went. . . I went everywhere. If they had got me anywhere they would have killed me. I used to go to Jangaon alone and come back alone. The landlord said I'll give you a letter—you'll have to look after your own things. I'll give you a letter to Ram Reddy that's all. And so I took the letter and came home. We planted the seedlings and let the water flow. We did everything. The field came up so fine. The seed-bed came up so well. By that time Kasi Mallayya's seed-bed was ready, thay all (the landlords' musclemen) came from somewhere, running. Now where did all that grain go? It would have yielded four large measures of paddy. Where did all that paddy go? Where did all that mud go? There were two beds in the corners and they just cut it all and took it away. I went to the town again. I went because this was happening. Then Laxmi Narasimha Reddy came with a lot of others. Then they came to the stream, untied the carts and came to me. They said they came to ask how such a terrible thing could happen. Then they set out to go to Visnur, [obviously to defy the landlord] with their things, their blankets and mats and all their stuff. The cart was Nirmala Rami Reddy's, the bullocks belonged to the people of Shapur. Then the people from Shapur and the people from our village all of them set out. As they were going along, right there, near this stream they got them, didn't they, mother? Do you hear? It was like pounding them with pestles. Such wide gaping wounds on their navels. Such wide streams of blood flowing. They removed their pants. They pulled them off. They pulled off their shirts. Then they pushed the cart into the well. . . . They pulled it apart and set fire to the carts. They pushed the wheels into the well. They drove the bullocks all the way to Hanamkonda. They wrought such havoc. Think . . . what would our condition have been? They drove some jenny motors here. . . that big—and *may his belly burn*—and he brought jenny motors and laid waste Rs 600 of mine. While the men were in jail they did all this to us. You know there was a son of mine, his loincloth had descended, he was as tall as that rafter there. The *amin* came in the morning and he came in the evening. Since the whole village was one, they hid us then. What could we do in times like these? Where

could we go? We never ate other folks property up [crying]. . . it was always ours that got destroyed. . . . What sin did we commit?. . . My son. . . they drove needles under his nails. They strung him up by his hair on a peg. My husband lost the use of his hand after he was beaten. Nearly 60 looms were lost. And then my earrings—both my earrings about 25 cents weight each and those ear tops, and then there were my armlets and my bracelets. I was married then. All this we put in a box and my younger son picked it up. It was all in that box. Was it only one thing that we lost, sir? We lost that, and we lost what we had at home. It was all gone. Then my son sold two bull calves. Each now worth Rs 1000. He sold it for a measure of grain, each calf. We sold ten kilos worth for a quarter kilo. The buffaloes went one way, the cows went another. Nearly sixty or seventy sheep, they were all taken away. So I thought—my land—take it all away, drive the cattle all away, after all we owe you Rs 500 from when we built the house. Now take it all away. So the cows went and then buffaloes. Such trouble. Such sore times. . . .

My middle son, he got nothing. My husband, he got nothing. We suffered so much even God knows about it. We never touched one bit of folk's property. We never got into anyone's hands. . . [crying]. We never interfered with anyone. . . . The fight for the fields had started. We took the field from the Mallampalli *karnam* on lease. Not from this village. We worked in that field after leasing it. All this land you see here. . . all this around here is mine. Do you see it's all mine. But my sons they sold it all. My older son left and so did my younger son. When they came my older son had nothing. He made such a noise and then he left. The younger one became a *sarpanch*. It is all finished. . . .

Now the Sangham—well it was the same Sangham. The Sangham said 'don't call off the movement', and then they said 'call it off' and that was what the fight was about . The *vakil* Sahib—Arutla Laxmi Narasimha Reddy—came to talk about this. It was a real to-do. Then Laxmi Narasimha Reddy and Ram Reddy were organizing in this area. He was in the main Sangham. 'No, don't vacate the field now. Don't lease it'—that Malla Reddy said—'the Mallampalli landlord gave it to us'. By the time this matter came up they ran away. But then they came to the village and destroyed it all. The police didn't come then. Ah, it was then that they destroyed it all. What havoc it was! What wilderness! Oh

father! Do you hear me! I don't even live with my son today. I live with my granddaughter.

At that time all the women in the village were in the Sangham. Now where are they? They've all fled, all fucked off. All these folks came and I fed them in my house. . . . No one else did. . . I fed them my stuff. . . no one else did. . . they stayed in my house for four months. They guarded me for four months. While they were in jail, these folks guarded the house. What did they do [the Union Army]? They did this same work. It was good if the Union Army came. Twenty-five army trucks came. Not all the women were members. Everyone just kept *still*, each in their places. Before that it was good. We supported each other. If they said something to me, other women would come forward for me and if they said such and such to another, I would say no, *me*. We were all together, united. Later we thought, enough, and kept quiet. I went to the town looking for the minister. I went looking all over the place and lost everything I had. The women were taken by the Sangham people. For every hearing at Kamala Devi's trial, I used to take people to be witnesses. When Kamala Devi came I used to make her bed and wait on her. At that time, Ramachandra Rao was in prison. Only Laxmi Narasimha Reddy was here. The land was there before the Sangham came. It was there already. We had already leased it somehow. We had had it for nearly twenty years. When we kept it they couldn't bear it and took it away from us. To those who had a title, no one said anything. They snatched away what we took. Where did we have the papers? After all we had only leased it. So when it all came to a head we said we won't give it up, but they wouldn't give it up either. 'You should leave the Sangham', the landlord's men said. We said we wouldn't.

Women and men came to the conference. Ah. . . they came when they held it in Jangaon. Yes, that Tirumala Reddy came, disguised as a *koya*. And so when he came like that (may his belly burn) they caught him. They caught him and Tirumala Reddy near Jangaon, they killed them near the hedge. Yes they killed them at the crossroads. They burnt his house down and carried all the corn away. When all this was happening how could we think, 'why this struggle?' It was in our hands already—how could we give it up? They took it away [forcibly]. After they snatched everything away what could we do?. . . After my husband came back, I got my fields back.

For all that fight I didn't get back all my fields. Many people took them and sold them. That Mallanti landlord's family sold them. It wasn't him, it was his wife. There was a *dudekule* [people who clean cotton to make mattresses] that eunuch, that low caste fellow took it and he sold it too. Many families lost their land. Even that family with five sons, people asked, how will they work? And how will they live if you take away their lands? That short fellow said, you know what, can't they go and beg in some corner? How can they beg? Even if they all beg, what can they get? Where can they get anything from—don't do such a thing. Then they bought back two and a half acres of land paying some money from the shepherd. Oh, what injustice. . . we struggled so much, and this is all that is left. These patches of dry land remained, this little field remained. Everything, everything else is lost. How can I remember it all? Is it only one thing that happened? What havoc they created! The Sangham people keep coming, even today. They keep coming and going. But acres and acres have got washed away, and everything has been sold! Just these two acres remain.

I have five sons. . . one daughter, I gave away in marriage to Ramanapeta. Two sons died. . . one in this struggle itself. The youngest one died. . . if they were to be alive, my story would have been different. . . my husband also died after all those thrashings, he died in those times.

The Sangham, it is there everywhere. We said we would not leave. 'You *should* leave,' they said. That is what led to this. To the Sangham everyone goes, men go, women go, everybody goes. In my house, nobody objected to our joining the Sangham. All of us used to go. There was no obstacle. We used to work in the fields, my caste work [Ailamma belonged to the washer-women community] didn't interest me. There were no farmhands and no sons. No daughter-in-law, no daughters. I used to work in the fields, sowing, reaping, I used to go round for everything, used to go about quite well, used to do quite well. . . . Now I have fallen ill with disease and become weak. Now when I walk, I have no legs, my eyes can't see; they gave me medicine, the doctor came and gave me medicine. They even took me to the city. . . .

What work is there left in the Sangham? I have worked for them, served them, looked after them. . . . What work do I have now? Cooking and serving. . . always giving to all those who came, me and my mother. . . Sangham, these are Sangham people I said and

served. Won't I serve them? I will give you also. I will serve everyone. Because of the love I have. Not only because they [the Sangham] fought for my land. Even if they fought for the land, do I have land now? They kept them in jail in Chanchalguda jail. They kept them there for a year. They kept them in Jangaon for six months, in Khammam for six months. Did they keep them in one place? In the end what did they do to my son? They put my husband near Gudivada. Did they put us together, in one corner? May their bellies burn. What trouble, was it a single trouble! In the end they put me in Nalgonda. Who will take me to jail? No one took me. They couldn't get me. No they couldn't get me. I was here but careful. The person from Nalgonda said, oh you married a girl from this village. I went to the court, to Nalgonda. What trouble, what trouble. As I was coming from there one spotted me. Oh my father! how can I tell you, what a fight it was. Before you could pacify them, the police had arrived. They beat each other up and broke free. Such trouble should never come. How did I face all that trouble? How did I escape from there? I don't know. I always managed to hide. Did I ever let them see me? That Babu fellow [Babu Rao—son of the notorious landlord Visnur Ramachandra Reddy—was equally notorious for killing and torturing people], may his belly burn, he came on horseback. He tied a man to a tree and killed one, he killed two or three on the bank of the lake. As two brothers came from that side, they caught them and set fire to them with straw. May his belly burn! They caught him in Jangaon. In Jangaon the washerman caught him. They killed him right there. I was not there.

When I went out my sons used to mind the house. They were small fellows, one that high and the other that much. My daughter was there and my daughter-in-law. One daughter-in-law was still at her mother's house. They used to be afraid.

Now the marriage took place. There were just two clothes in the bag and carefully without telling which village I came from, I travelled along. He sent me with two sarees. Even the policeman helped a little. Some people helped. When the twenty-five military lorries came my children were in my brother's house. The policeman, the children were all there in the same house. Are all men alike? If they had been weak and tender they would never have survived. Oh Mother! The sickles they would carry them away. The axes they would carry them away, the knives they would carry

off. Two lamps and two lanterns. One from that house and one from this, they took all away. Plate and brass pot they took away. They carried away the brass pitchers. In the end we left the house and went away. We went east to Bezawada. I went where there were Sangham people. May their bellies prosper. I was not frightened. I don't know how that Narayana took me. I placed my faith in God and went. I went alone. I used to come alone from Jangaon. One day as I walked and walked from the town I slipped near Raghunathapalli. It was late in the night. I was walking in the night and I missed a step, had a bundle in my hand. I was standing there near Raghunathapalli. He cried out, oh! she's dead, she's dead, and reached for me and held me tight! It was a policeman who held me and my heart was quaking. I would die without seeing my children. Whoever. . . he came to save me. He took me to the *amin*, his wife and children were there. They all said 'you've come, you've come.' They set out a cot, spread a carpet and asked me to sleep. I couldn't sleep. No matter how I turned, I couldn't sleep. How did I go, how did I fall into this, I thought. As we rose in the morning they said, mother go your way carefully, be careful. Much later he came and stayed in my village for a long time.

I set out from there and came all the way here. How did I come? How did I go?. . . five or six days at a time, I would go without food. Even without eating my belly would feel full. As if I had just eaten and drunk. Even if someone said 'I'll feed you', I didn't feel like eating. Oh my Mother! Then, such hardship, now, such sorrow. Now this hardship is upon me. Even though I have sons I am like this. My sons they thrive! One there and one here. But what's the use? What do they *see*? What do they *do*? My grand-daughter has to feed me, my son's daughter. She gives what she can. Today fair weather or foul do they look after me? What do they look after? What is there to look after? Yesterday when it seemed it was all over, I was nearly gone, that man, may he prosper, came and gave me an injection. It hurt till the other day. . . my backbone hurts. . . all this hurts. . .

They didn't give me the land in my name. They distributed it all. They didn't give it, may their bellies burn! They didn't give it, what does it yield? They gave four bags of paddy. How will I live on four bags of paddy?

Four bags of this
my rags from this

my blouse from this
food for visitors from this
lamp grease from this
grease for my hair also from this
and a lump of meat when I feel the desire
All from this. . .

What can it all give? Are they giving it from their houses? And how can it go on if they don't give from theirs?

Ail Reddy came and took my photograph. He said I will get some money. The other day when Laxmi Narasimha Reddy died, I went to Pembarthi for the ceremonies. That's where they took my picture. Everybody came, Kamala Devi, Ramachandra Reddy, Rama Reddy, Chandrayya, all of them came; people from all over took my photograph. What will we do with it, you will get money. I was never in prison, but wasn't my husband? Shouldn't he get? shouldn't I get? After coming from jail what did I have left? What was left? See, all this we did. I didn't get, my husband didn't get. . . he died with all the thrashings. Sangham ate our food—we didn't eat anybody's. We left our house and went—what was there for people after coming back from prison?

Our bangles broken. . .
our pots broken. . .
no pot even to beg in. . .
no pot to cook in. . .
no pot even to drink water. . .

We went away, lived there and came back. My mother was there. Our grain, our cattle and flock they sent it there. We should salute them. We went but came back because there was no way to live in any other place. They brought us back. The Union Army came. We wandered house to house begging. . . there was a blanket the landlord had given us, we took that blanket around to the fields where the harvest lay, collecting handfuls of grain. We lived eating that. The washing of the village, only kinsmen did. After we came back, they gave it up. So we did the washing in the village. We had a measure of paddy in a pot. That is my tale. Such a tale! What one thing can I remember?

When I went out, my daughter and daughter-in-law used to stay

at home. No one bothered them. Why will they go to them? May their bellies burn, they had looted everything why would they come? What was there for them to come back to, the sons of whores? My children were all married. Only one son was still single. Only one son was married after everything was scattered. He was the only young one. These lands came up for sale. The Anantapur landlord sold us this land. We bought some dry land. We kept the money in hand. We have some rice. That will do, we thought. We got him married. He cultivated the fields near the well. The *sarpanch* of this village is my grandson. They are all there in the Sangham, my kith and kin. I was so proud of the Sangham. Then they said that the Sangham meant that the poor would be equal and their kingdom would come. Now it is the ones who have eaten who keep eating. Do they feed the poor? May his belly burn, he keeps eating. Do the poor get anything? We fought in the struggle. So what? Are the people who struggled here? They're gone! They are all dead, the ones who struggled. It was because the Sangham didn't call off the struggle, there was such trouble. They said leave it. They were taken to the Chanchalguda jail. The *malipatel* asked them to leave the village. They said, 'it's all right if we die but we won't give up.' After that how could they give up? The Sangham squads used to fight with weapons. After that. . . I don't remember why they said give up. As long as they were here the fields stayed with us. They left quietly and the fields were snatched away by these folks.

Then, what was there to fear? They came and killed so many. They left wearing just loincloths. I tore up the *dhotis* in my house for loincloths for them. There were no clothes. They snatched them all away. They burnt them and destroyed everything. They burnt even the carts. What was left? They had such wide wounds. Such streams of blood flowing. May their bellies burn. But I never got beaten. I never got caught. That day no one would ever say she is in the next house or she is in this house. If it was this day they would tell on one. They would not hold back. They would feel, 'if she goes, she goes, what is it to us?' and they would be quite peaceful.

There were both men and women in the Sanghams. The enemy burnt the ironsmith's things. They killed two brothers, the potter's son and the shepherd's son, they were grazing the sheep, young fellows both. . . they were killed. They tied them to a tree and

killed them—may their bellies burn! They molested the women. I was not there. But many things happened. What did the Sangham do? They didn't let those men take the women away to Visnur; all the village folk together stopped them. Those fellows—they collected fines from everyone—may their bellies burn! Caught them by the limbs and dragged them away. They kept dragging them. The men—they beat them to death. They didn't beat the women. When they were taking the men and women away to the landlord's mansion, the men from the Sangham said even if we die you can't take the women away. At that time they wouldn't let the women go; now it is different. Now they don't care. We were together at that time, so it worked. Now it's like 'what is it to me if you die, what is it to you if I die.' Now they are like that. Now. . . you think—if I die, you can take my property. What is the Sangham today? They come, pass by casually and go. When they come, we feed them and they eat, that's all. There was respect and discipline at that time. Where is it today? There is a lot of difference between today's Sangham and that Sangham. What do the Sangham folk tell us today? Do I know how to repeat it? One strange thing after another. Many of them tell such strange things, how can I recount them? You think I can tell you. I can't. Why should I say I can, when I can't? I can't even tell you what I see and understand. How can I tell you about what I don't. The land, my sons divided it amongst themselves. May they be covered with mud. As soon as my husband died, they divided it and took it. When my husband was alive, there was half an acre of land. They started grabbing it when my husband was still alive. We had half of an acre of wet land and two acres of dry land. Two young ones were with me but as soon as he died, they took it away. May their bellies prosper! They are eating off it now.

Here also the town is growing. All this country is dry land. There's only one temple across there. This is all one son's and that belongs to another. Another is my dead son's. They are building a house over there.

We used to work for gatherings when the Sangham people came. They were all men. They would cook if they were asked to. There were pots and pans and they would cook. The vegetables would come from the gardens. The village folk would send them. From Charutla and Sitaramapuram they came. No grain came but they sent vegetables. My buffaloes, two of them, and two cows used to yield

milk. They ate and drank their fill. That is what I used to do at that time and this is how it is now. Can I sing those songs or tell you what they said? If I tell you how I suffered. . . If I tell you, I will keep telling you and it will go on and on.

In those days we didn't sing although they asked us to sing, we were too scared. We didn't sing then for fear of the Visnur landlord. They called me Balanagamma [a famous folk heroine]. They sang songs about me. Even the begging fakirs would sing the songs as they roamed about. The songs were sung right across the country. They sang in the fields. They sang as they stood. They danced and acted plays when we gathered together. Whatever they did we had the same trouble. How can the dream of a new order that the Sangham spoke of ever leave us? If they came and spoke a word, it was enough. How old was I then, you ask. By the time the Union Army came, my child-births were over. I was that small—like that grandchild there—when I got married, and I matured four years later. My children were born from my fifteenth year. My oldest son, I bore at fifteen. I had five sons and two daughters. A child-birth every three years. Oh my goodness! Who can remember all that. One died of a fever—suddenly. One died of a plague and one left. All this happened after the first child. . . I must be more than seventy years now. Even now I have the hope that the Sangham will come to power. How can that hope die? My sons—I wanted to tell them of the Sangham—but couldn't really do it. My daughter was raped when I was not there. My daughter's name is Somu Narasamma. She had two children. She had a small infant, new-born and they beat her up and raped her. Then my son-in-law did not take her back. May he be ruined. He brought himself another one. The Sangham people couldn't do anything when my daughter was ruined.

When I roamed about in the Sangham who dared to gossip about me? They were afraid because I was an older woman. There is nothing of anyone else. My husband was nobody. My son was nobody. Only my name has remained. The Sangham folk come even today. It seems everyone says—one should work like Ailamma. . . that's what they say. Rubbish! Today if you help one person it is as if you have done a great thing. In my times it wasn't like that. That's what happened. That's my story.

Ch. Kamalamma

My name is Kamalamma. I come from the village Mainala in Manikota Taluka. My husband is from Rampuram. Ours was a bonded family. It is painful to tell the story of my life. My mother was a slave in the house of some landlords. For many generations my mother's people had worked as slaves in the landlord's houses. By then three generations had existed like this. My mother, her mother and grandmother, had all been slaves in the same landlord's house. They say my grandmother's name was Venkatamma, I never saw her though. My mother's sister also lived in that house and she died there. None of them was married. It seems we belonged to the Telaga community. Many years ago, in a time of hardship, my mother's grandmother was sold for a measure of rice and a rupee to a Brahmin family. Then she stayed there as a slave in that house, worked there, kept in turn by one or other of the landlords and so it continued down the family. My father was not married when he came to live with this wealthy landlord who was his cousin. He helped his cousin with his work as a *patwari* (tax collector). My mother was also there and when she came of age my father offered to keep her. They lived together and you can call it marriage or being kept or whatever you will. Anyway they were happy and he looked after us, his children, quite well. My mother bore fourteen children and only five of us have survived now. When I was fifteen my father died. The Telangana struggle had started then. I had an elder sister. The mistress of the household did not want her to be married but instead wanted to send her as a slave to one of her daughters. That was the family tradition. Those days nobody would marry girls who attained puberty. Even the slaves had to be virgins and should not have attained puberty. But one of the mistress's nephews raped my sister and she became pregnant. He raped her but she was not given any separate maintenance or house. Her life was ruined. The mistress died without being able

to send my sister along with the daughter. My sister also died eventually. It was not easy for us to get husbands. We could be married off only to other people working like this in the landlord's houses. I was eight years old when I was married. This was forty-nine years ago. Then there was no question of dowry. They usually asked, "what will you give our girl?" If we combed our hair neatly and walked down the street, if any *dora* saw us, he would not leave us alone. There was one goldsmith woman. She was a widow of thirty or thirty-five years. Her husband died after she had one child. She went to the *dora's* house for a pick-axe. The *dora* had a friend who belonged to the Gaundla community. This Gaundla man pulled her by the hand. She didn't say anything, after all it was the landlord's friend. She came out and told his wife that he had behaved like this. The man was furious with her and complained to the landlord. The *dora* sent five or six *lambada* men who waylaid her and and raped her on the way to her sister's village which was about two or three miles away. This was near a clump of palm trees there. They were drunk when they caught her and tortured her. They even poured sand into her vagina. She didn't die. But her parts were all swollen up and sore. Someone brought her home, cared for her and fomented her. My father was different. He did not marry another wife. Although he was a Brahmin, he came and lived with us. Even in the end he came to me when I was in Posera village in Mulugu Taluka. He died there and my son performed his last rites for him. In those days no father looked after the family like that. Instead they simply swallowed up the women's youth and left them without food to eat or a roof over their heads. My father was not like that, he cared for us. He was a little progressive and educated us. There was no schooling after the fourth class and although in those days, the Nizam's days, we had no learning—not the women—he did not want to ruin our lives but to make us useful. So my sisters, my brother and I were educated. We learnt Urdu and Telugu. but there was no English or Hindi.

My mother-in-law's life was also like ours. She was bonded to a powerful Reddy family. My husband also had to work there cooking and serving them. . . . As the family we worked for was Brahmin—we had to do only the outside work, the sweeping and washing, but my husband, he had to do even the cooking. That was in Ravula Ram Reddy's house. Unable to bear the trouble in

these landlord's houses we came into the struggle. This showed us the way.

Although my husband was a grown man the mistress used to beat him and ask him to work. They would eat meat but find it difficult even to give him a little tamarind paste in the nights. That was the life of a bonded labourer. Graze the buffaloes, collect dung, cook the food, one had to do everything. Go to another village and fetch so and so and he would go. Go and kick that fellow and he would do it. They even used him as a *goonda*. I didn't suffer like that but he suffered that way. My mother, sister and my brother all had to do this kind of work. The mistress wanted to make me, my younger brother and sister also, into slaves but my father did not allow them to. Those *dorasanis* were really *dorasanis*! They sat on their fine chairs, and cots and we under their cots cleaning their vomit, cleaning shit and doing every possible chore for them. Nothing but dirt. It was because the Communist Party fed me, that my learning stood me in good stead and I know at least this much and I live like this. But my sister, she has forgotten everything and it's just all wasted. It was because we were unable to bear troubles like these that we came into the Party. And it is this struggle that showed us a way.

First my brother came into the movement. Then he became the squad commander of a squad of twenty. That was in the days of the Nizam. They used to move around blocking the levy that the Nizam's government was collecting and taking away. They tried to set fire to the wagons carrying the levy. So the Razakars and police came in large numbers and set fire to my brother's village. There were nearly eight comrades in that village and their houses were burnt down. My son was three months old then, and I was sixteen years old. With this the family lost its support and they had nothing to fall back on. The repression on my husband also increased and unable to put up with the landlords on the one side and the police on the other, he also joined my brother in the Party. I stayed behind till my son was nearly ten months old. Then I felt that there was no point staying on. I was young. My husband was away and what with the police raids and burning and killing in the village it was far better for me to join him. I was afraid of what they would do to me and so I too joined the Party. My son was looked after by my father. My second brother was arrested in an oil mill, when he was carrying ammunition from Bezawada. He was beaten, and jailed in

Gulbarga prison for five and a half months. He gets a freedom fighter's pension even now. My elder brother was arrested after the Union Army came. He does not get any pension.

My work in the Party was in the cultural squad. My voice is quite good. I used to tell stories, sing songs and roam about. Later I used to write circulars etc., in the Area Committee and Regional Committee centres. Then the movement expanded considerably. Every village had a police camp. The comrades could not move about. They were being shot at sight. In such a time even the people could not let us come near them. Then we formed a squad again and started doing cultural work travelling through the villages. The *koya* tribe were were barely civilized then. The men would wear just a small loincloth. The women would wear a loin cloth inside and throw another small piece of cloth across the body. It was only after we went there that they learnt some civilized behaviour. Women learnt to wear some clothes. They came to know that women were creatures of flesh and blood. They began to move forward, became intelligent and there was some change. No government ever cared about the forest people. Not the Nizam's, not the Congress. Only when the movement spread, we penetrated among these tribals. I did mostly cultural work. I was in the hospital centres and learnt some first aid and giving injections. The doctor held classes for us. I worked in Manukota Taluka. I wandered around Khammam. I roamed around the Garla Jagir. All that was forest area. Then I went to Manthena and Madhavpur. I did not go to Suryapet. Later Swarajyam, I and Tirumala Seshayya's wife Acchamamba, all of us met in the forest.

Once the doctor was taking classes in a village in Suryapet. My son was just ten months. All of us, men and women, were listening to the class. He began to cry. I felt very bad, So many people sitting there and he was crying, I was embarrassed. The doctor said: 'don't feel bad, the future is his.' But I could not bear it. There was a comrade called Gaddam Pullayya from my village. I gave him the child and said, 'take him to my sister-in-law.' She had just lost an infant child and so she suckled my child and reared him. My milk dried up after some days. The raids had also increased. The Union Armies had come. The hunt for communists had started. Till the other day we were fighting that enemy (the Razakars). Now it was this enemy. 'This seems to be the bigger enemy!' was the decision of the Party. There is no use staying here. The armies will not let us

survive. Better to retreat and so we retreated into the forest. Even then I was hesitant to go deep into that forest. Then my husband said, 'if I go alone and you are caught you will be killed. It is better we stay together and die together.' I melted at these words and went with him. The reason I hesitated was that once someone went, there was no guarantee that they would return. So why should I go where there was trouble and what will happen to me. After all, I was young and it was hard to go into the forest. Not because I was loyal to the government. Frankly I was not sure whether I could stand up to the hardships. However, he convinced me and I went along with him. After that I roamed about with them in the forest for about six months. Then I wanted to see my son and I asked them to let me go. They agreed. The night that I left for the village, information came that the Union government would be surrounding the entire area. The Party leaders asked me to leave immediately. It would be difficult for me, a woman, to run in the night. If I were caught I would be killed. So they asked me to go. I set out the same night and walked and walked till sunrise. I managed to reach the deep forest. There was an attack on some of our people who escaped and also reached the same place. And so it went on for a year and a half. By then I was pregnant again. I kept moving around with them. It was time for the child to be born. The Congress government had taken the people from the surrounding ten villages and put them in one camp. We had no protection there. No hope of getting a midwife. I was very troubled by the very thought of delivering the child. There was a village nearby called Sampeta. That was not included in the camp. There was an old midwife there and they fetched her. I delivered under a cluster of bushes in the night and after the old woman had done her work they sent her away before daybreak. I reared that child six months as I was moving and working for the Party. Then the Area Committee leaders said to me, "Kamalamma, either you must give this child away to someone or else you must leave us and go and live in a village with your son.' Among those who said this were Omkar, Kondeti Vasudeva Rao—did you hear that?—and there was Tirumala Rao. I was working under all of them. 'The boy is six months old and is bound to cry sometimes. The leaders are all with us in the forest. So many lives will be lost because of this one child. . .'

'Secondly each one of us serves many thousands of people. This

one son of yours cannot do any work. We can't even bring him up in the hope that some day he will serve many people. You give him away to someone or else take him away and live somewhere.'

But, they added—'if you go, they will chop you up to bits, they will put chilli powder on you. They will torture you, they will kill you. It's your decision. Think about it.' My husband Appanna was not there with me. He had gone to Manthena Madhavpur. I was alone with them. So when they asked me to decide, I thought hard about it. I was in no state to go. I was afraid in my belly. If I died I would rather die with them . . . Why go and live in the village for the child—I decided to give away the child. But there was no one to take the child. Even the *koyas* refused. The child was very fair. So the *koyas* said–'This child!—no sister—how can we hide him in our homes? They will ask us who he is, sister. They will kill us sister. No we won't take him.' Then the Party decided that this boy should be taken to the village Boggutta, which is near Pedda Tala Gedda. They would tie a note to his neck which said, 'We can't rear the child and so we are leaving him here.' This was Omkar's decision. The police would patrol that area and find the child. Which mother, I ask you, can find this courage? I wept a little then. I said I couldn't go and asked them to call Appanna and show him the child. Then Omkar said: 'This is not the correct consciousness for the working class.' My head reeled. Why should I have to listen to such accusations? I had not come into the struggle for a livelihood. I had come to do my share of work and die. I had no hope of surviving the struggle. I thought . . . why should I be so attached to this little mite? I changed my mind and agreed to go and leave the child.

Then a comrade was sent with me. We came to Garla Jagir. We walked two days. We met an organiser there. He said: 'Why did they decide to throw away the child? Let us find someone here to give the child to.' The only families there were those who had escaped being evacuated to camps and who had gone underground and were living in the forest. There was a man there who worked in the coal mines. He had three sons but all of them had died. We begged him to take this child and he agreed. I placed the child in his hands and left. After that neither my body, my mind nor my eyes stayed in my control. There was one torrent of tears from eyes to earth. To reach the spot where our comrades were took two days. It is thirty-six years today and I do not know what has happened

to that child. Once some revolutionaries came and asked me about my experiences, my life story. When they asked about the child I was full of grief. About my own sacrifice—what can I say? Thigala Satyanarayana Rao who died, used to say—'We read the history of many countries. In our country, in our Telangana—you are the ideal—the model woman. Why do you lose heart? Why grieve that you have given away the child? Your story will also be history.' Thus they comforted me but how does one swallow a mother's grief? After all he grew in my body didn't he?

Once when I was expecting this child, we were in the Area Committee centre. Appanna had come along to organize in this area. Swarajyam, Thirumala Rao and several other comrades were all together there. We sent a comrade with money to buy some necessities for us. He did not return at the fixed time on the fixed day. We didn't know what had happened. We were full of suspicion. So we decided to shift from that place. We went across a hillock there to the other side. When we moved we did not observe the precautions and went together along one path. So we left tracks. We sent a comrade called Basha to collect the news from the village Lambadigudem. I was suffering from morning sickness then and I lay there. A comrade was cooking then. Another, Ramanarasayya, was writing circulars. Many years later he was shot after he joined the Naxalite movement. The comrade who went for supplies had been arrested and he brought the police to the spot where we were originally. The scout Basha saw him when he was following our tracks and leading the police to the new centre to which we had moved. The comrade saw Basha after about a furlong and broke into a run. The police then shot him. Hearing the shot we thought: 'Our comrade is dead' and began to run, Ramanarasayya, a Suryapet comrade Ramulu and I, all in different directions. We left everything and ran for about four or five furlongs. I was weak and exhausted. This Basha ran to the centre and took the things and notebooks and hid them. Then he ran after me and said, 'Kamalakka, stop.' I didn't stop because I thought the police were following—I just kept running. When he said he was Basha, I joined him, then we joined the other comrades and went to the squads.

There was a woman in our squad called Venkatamma. She was a Koya, she was our squad commander and always carried hand grenades. She was from Lingala Kothagudem. She died some time

ago. She was a good comrade. Once just the two of us were alone in the forest. It was dark. We could not stay there or sleep there. We had to set out and walk about two miles. We walked through the night and then made a small hollow in the grass and slept there. She was a woman of great courage. Once near Manthena Madhavpur, the landlords in the village got together and killed one of our organizers. Then our squads surrounded that village and killed the men who had killed our comrade. Venkatamma took part in that raid. She wore men's clothes, put her weapon on her shoulder and went with them. No one could discover that she was a woman. In the Allapalli fortification there was a police camp. They gathered all the village folk from the surrounding villages into that camp. They did not allow the people to leave the camp which was guarded by home guards. Then the Party decided to thrash the *goondas*, the home guards in that camp, and to set fire to the camp. The squads set out to do that. Venkatamma's squad also went. They surrounded the camp and set fire to it. When they were doing this one of the home guards saw Venkatamma and tried to catch her. She knocked him down with the butt of her gun and escaped. She took part in many guerilla attacks. Later, sitting around in the centres, each one would say, I went like this and this happened and so on. We would exchange our stories. In the cultural squad. . .Shantamma and I used to work together. In the hospital centre I worked with Mohan Rao's wife Acchamamba. In the Area Committee centre, Swarajyam and I worked together. While we were doing cultural work in the forest, many *koya* women comrades joined us. Acchamamba and I never carried weapons. Because we were educated a bit, the Party felt that we could convince people around. Among the few women in the squads there were few who were educated and intelligent. After all they were all *koya* comrades. Once we were in a village called Chityala. I was pregnant again now, after giving away that child in the forest. It was the beginning of 1952. The struggle was to cease in a few months. The village-folk reported to us that there was a stranger in the village. One man went and brought him there. He did not know our tongue. He spoke Hindi. When we gave him a slate and pencil and asked him to write, he wrote only in Hindi but no other language. He kept weeping. He wept and wept till the morning. I was carrying nine months then. Appanna was our squad leader. All the others felt that he was a CID and should

be killed. I felt very troubled. I was upset by his weeping. Since Appanna was my husband I pleaded with him the whole night. I said, 'We don't know where he is from, who he is.' I couldn't bear the thought of killing him. Then Appanna, either because of my pleading or his weeping or his own humanity, decided to let the stranger go. We kept him till the evening and then let him go. He fled. The next morning the police camp was there. The police came in strength and set fire to the village. If the others knew, I would have been penalized, but secretly Appanna criticized me a lot.

Soon after this the Party gave a call to stop the struggle. We were all very unhappy with this decision. The comrades refused to lay down their arms. They said, 'to surrender their weapons was to surrender their lives.' It was very hard. They said, 'You take our guns and shoot us instead. We had lived for years without meat or vegetable or rice, drinking a bowl of gruel between us. How could we lay down weapons after so many years of hardship? To put down the weapons meant to submit to them.' But they came from Kerala, from Bengal. The big leaders all came to tell us to give up the struggle. The whole All India Party spared no effort to stop the struggle in Telangana. If we hadn't stopped — would it have expanded or would it have been wiped out without any trace? It is difficult to say. Even after we laid down arms the Congress government shot two or three of our comrades. The comrades were very upset. After all we knew that this was a government which would have no principles. We knew that this government would not treat us with sympathy. After all even before this government had come we had sung songs about what it would do to us.

No, not for us brother peasant,
Not for us the Congress rule
No, not for us brother coolie
No not the Congress rule
Taxes whether we are born or die
Cuttings, thrashings, foul abuse
A hell of debts and bonded slavery
No, not for us the Congress rule.

And thus we returned to our ordinary lives. We had no means of livelihood. Neither my parents nor my mother-in-law. So the

Party gave us each a bullock and Rs 120. To some families they gave a pot or two. They gave me Rs 60 and him Rs 60. A bullock cost Rs 60 in those days. One could harness a plough. The land had been divided among the people. After all we were the Party workers. We were a poor family after all. Later he worked with Nagi Reddy's Naxalite Party. He (Appanna) was convicted for four years and three months in the Nagi Reddy Conspiracy Case. The children were all around my neck. He wrote saying, 'sell the house and support yourself and the children.' I went from house to house and virtually begged for things to keep my children fed and clothed. Lots of troubles can come to a person. It isn't wealth that matters, it is your strength, your conviction. . . I had that strength. We still haven't left the Party. Our days have passed this way. I keep travelling all over Andhra. Till the other day, we were singing *golla suddulu* (a shepherd's narrative songs), we told *harikathas*, put up plays. When the movement gets dull then these cultural programmes help to revive it. But these last two years, I don't feel strong enough and I've stopped going around singing.

In Akkirajupalli

This is a discussion with a group of village women. It was one of the villages where a mass rape took place, and nearly everyone was affected by the brutality that was let loose.

KONDAMMA: Our village is Keshavapuram. I am called Kondamma. The Razakars came and surrounded us. They put the women on one side and the men on another side and surrounded us. The men—they stabbed them, and the women—they stripped them. They plucked off our black marriage beads. They came in their uniforms. Where did they have buses and things? So they came in carts to loot our homes.

They threatened to kill all the men and the women started wailing. They said, 'We'll chase you into the backyard, fetch some thorn bush and set fire to it and throw you all into that fire.' One fellow had climbed a tree. He aimed his gun at me. He fired and everyone ran in all directions. They came into the village. . .they set fire to the houses. They plucked off our black beads, snatched the gold that we were wearing. They chased us all into the bush and said they would set fire to us. They stabbed some. They stripped some. There were many others with me—about ten or fifteen *gollas*(shepherds). My great aunt was also there. They snatched all our bead strings. When he shot me, I lost consciousness. Then Golusala Ellamma, my great aunt, Golusala Latchamma, Sala Balamma, Mangali Koulamma were all there with me. Even Chakali Enki was there but she is dead now.

I had no children then. We were frightened to stay in the village, we cooked and lived near the well. We cooked and ate in the forest (wilderness). Because there was danger in the village, we had all run away. Till they came and attacked us we didn't know (anything) really. . . we picked up a handful or an armful of stuff and took it with us. We cooked there and ate. The ones who were

well off could arrange things and hide their stuff. Could we live eating like this? We hid what we had. . . .How did we know who would live and who would die? In those days folk just sat where they were, gazing at the corpses and weeping. Do you think that was the time to shout at them? I tell you, they were about to stab us also! Were those the times to say anything at all? We just worked hard. And what work it was—we did anything. I didn't know know anything about the military. Where was I then? I was in hospital after this rifle wound. First they treated me with herbs and stuff. When it didn't get better, they took me to the hospital.

We did all this because the Sangham folk came for us. And that was how it happened. . .

VAJRAMMA: My name is Vajramma. In those days when the Razakars asked us to dance *bathkamma* we danced. We stripped when they asked us to strip. In those times where was the honour, where was the shame? We were all like this. . . .And there they laid them down and beat them up—in front us. My brother-in-law—they stabbed him in his rectum. By the time they pushed the bayonet through and pulled it out his life had left him. His guts just spilled out. Over there they killed and here they set fire to the houses. We used to leave our babies in the cradle and run for our lives. That's all there was to it. We ran out of the villages. We used to carry chilli powder and stones and run. We were afraid because our men were involved. I tell you, this was our pitiful state then.

There were people in the Communist Party. The Razakars came to kill them—didn't they? And the police on the other side. As soon as the communists left they would come and beat us up. Because we cooked and fed them, as soon as the police left, the communists would come for food. The police would come next and beat us up. They came threatening to rape us. They did too. There, that one, she was plucking the corn ears in the field when they dragged her out and raped her—in Tarigopullapalli. Here name is Tati Siddamma. The police came from Akkanpeta. She was in Cheriyal hospital for three months..She hadn't any children then. She was not even a woman yet. Now she has a daughter. We wondered how she would live. Sunrise or sunset—we slept a whole year in the wilderness. You know the corn fields—they can't see anything from the other side. We'd leave the old ones behind so that they wouldn't hear us—because they would cough and the infants

because they would cry. We never slept in the same place two nights. Even in the forest we used to go in along the path into the trees and sleep there. The Party folk told us to safeguard our lives. Our people were in the Communist Party. We left our homes and the whole day we got a person to guard us and we cooked for ourselves. For fear of our lives we would set a man on the tamarind tree to look out and then start cooking on a fire. When they said anyone was coming we would leave the pots on the fire, the children in their slings and start running. Then if they said there is no one we would come running back. If we came back alive—the children—otherwise, well, nothing. Did we have the time to think: we want these children? We want this family? We want this husband? Each ran for her life. Was there such a thing as mother and child? Some folk lived in nearby villages and came back alive after some days. We lived in the nearby talukas and came back alive. We went to our relatives. Some were in the squads. No one went as Party leaders but they went in the squads. Some went this way to Narmeta, that way to Potharam, some went to Tarigoppula. They all went—the whole village. The whole village was hated. In Tarigoppula there was a counter raid. In Narmeta there was a counter raid. 'Although we are trying so hard they are not giving in an inch.' This was the feeling the Razakars had. So because it wouldn't be good to be in the village, we stayed in clusters under the guava trees and near the wells. Now it was just about daybreak. The trees were green. And they were there in those trees. . . . they were in the hollows. . . the women were in the huts and the men outside.

In Ramapuram they were threshing the grain. Then the washerman from this village, he was a labourer there. He saw them and stopped threshing the grain and came by. 'Now what is there left? Come we will all die,' he said. What was left? My brother-in-law and some men began to run. As they ran, this man, do you know what he did? He said, 'We will give them something they ask for—don't be afraid. I'll give them the (navel) waist chain that I wear.' It was 50 *tolas* (500 gms.) the chain he wore. He said, don't be afraid. Some ran anyway, but some listened to him and stayed behind. We were all there. My child was just a month old. But my sister and I were married into the same village. We were running. . . . As we ran some folk came from another path. They came and turned her that way. I was caught here. Now my

brother-in-law and another cousin had got ready to go to Bachannapeta and were coming along. They kicked him on his bottom and he fell on the stones by the well and broke his front teeth. They they said, 'Get up' and hit him again. As he stood up they threw him across and stabbed him in the rectum. His guts fell out as they stabbed. He was crying out in thirst. It was summer . . . was it likely that we could get him water? So they are killing the man now, next they will kill us, we thought. Amidst all this, my daughter—one month old—was lost. I just stayed there. One fellow came and struck me on my cheek. Another came and pulled at this bangle. Another came and pulled at my earring. They asked what happened to the anklets I was wearing. Then I said, I don't have any, I have sold them. 'Didn't you have them when you were washing clothes by the well?' they asked. I said my mother-in-law had taken them away. Nearly 30 *tolas* of silver and three two-anna weights of gold we gave them in fear. What could we do? We gave it to them. That blow they hit me here—it still hurts. The other day I was in bed for a month when that wound started hurting again. He struck me here with the butt of the gun—with the butt. That's what they did. Drove us to such trouble, such trouble. They destroyed everything. . . .

GAJJELA BALAMMA: My name is Gajjela Balamma. We are from the barber caste. I have no sons. I had three sons and they all died. One daughter died. I never found them. I have one daughter. After my husband died, my children died—they all went. I lived, working for wages. The day I can, I work; the day I can't I lie quietly without a whimper.

My husband was also in the Party. That's why the Razakars were so furious—because he was there. In the days of the struggle there were blows and there were kicks. Then he died like that. They cut him up and killed him. It was all over. How can we tell that which did not happen? They speak of faith and loyalty don't they? Then will I get even this handful of rice (to day)?

The whole of this Akkirajupalli became famous. I heard them as they read and spoke of it. The whole village should be one—united they said. This Muslim—he went to Ammapuram and told them he was with us. He ate what we gave him, each of us a handful. He lived behind our house. He said he would go to Narimetta and bring sweet oil by sunset. How did we know he would bring them

with him? If we had known, we would have left—that very night. But at daybreak he brought them all back with him. They came and did all this—the Razakars. We couldn't tell which were the trees and which the Razakars. The police came. My daughter was in her cradle. I was making a *pulusu* then.

Till they came right to the houses we couldn't tell they were there. There was a door at the back and one in front. They were wearing big caps. They don't know our language—nothing. They were so big. They came into the houses and asked: 'Where have your men gone?' Then, where were the brass pots? So I was mixing the tamarind in a mud pot. I threw that water in their faces. After throwing it at them, I went into the middle of the village. Didn't we go to their house now? Near that house. . .my daughter died in the cradle. Maybe as I threw it, the curry fell in his eyes [laughs]. I must tell it to you as it happened mustn't I? They were rubbing their eyes and saying in their own language, 'Where have they gone?' From there I ran and jumped into another house. I jumped into the haystack where they keep the pots and grains and hid there. They knew that our village was communist. All of us were united weren't we? It's because the Muslims came in that such a thing happened. It was the Muslims who did this.

KONDAMMA: My name is Kasam Kondamma. There she is, Golusala Lachamma. Now what am I to say? Everyone is speaking. What if I'm an elderly woman? All of us are telling you what happened after all. Now what does it matter if I don't speak? What does it matter who it is who speaks? All those who saw something have spoken. After all, all of us were deep in it. This one? Her name is Mamidi Chakali Saidamma.

SAIDAMMA: My name is Saidamma. My husband, they pointed a gun at him and fired. Yes, they shot him just as they shot at me. He lived for a few days. Then he fell right across as soon as they shot him. The boys were there with us, they fell on the body and began to weep loudly. They said to me, 'Get up you whore! Get up' and they pushed me here and they pushed me there. They pulled the bracelets on my wrists and broke all my bangles. I had taken them out to wear just then and had just put them on. All those who came and saw us said, 'What—why are you bare-armed like this? And those of us who had put our bangles aside had just put them on.

They said, 'There are no raids, nothing' and so that night we put them on. We had taken them off and hidden them. They raided us at daybreak. There were trees here. Till he was right close up to us, we didn't spot him, that cruel one. He came out of the trees quickly. They broke my beads. They plucked my beads and then said, 'You whore, go away!' There was no one with us—just the two of us. 'It's just this girl and me', I said, but he kept beating us and drove us that far. He took us there and threw us down. All the folk were clinging together like dead. We were just like this. They said 'Move, Move', and made us stand like this. Though they told us to move, we thought we would all die together in one place. We stayed in a cluster together. They killed them all together and came into the village. They fell upon the village and set fire to it. If the police found the women alone, they would rape them, so the whole street stayed together in the potter's house. About ten or twenty of them surrounded the house. They pulled off her clothes and her blouse. To my mother-in-law and her mother-in-law they said 'Push something up between your legs.' Was it just one of us? The smoke from the rifle was in our eyes, what was there but the tears flowing?

It was not like this then. We didn't know whether we would live or die. Till two or three years that was the worry. For some time people went and lived wherever there was place. For fear, there was no lamp lit in this village for a whole month. For six months, not a light. Until the attack in Bairampalli.* All our folk went there out of fear. Who would listen?

We used to boil thorns and thistles and eat them at the time. If there were helpless old people in the forest they tied their hands and feet and threw them into the wells. Some were thrown onto the haystacks and burnt. If they didn't die, they would pile some more bush and set a match to it. It was the Razakars who did this. They burnt Bhudevayya like that. They burnt many like that. Oh, my mother! So many fires, it was like coming out of a fire. It happened in three villages like that. We formed a group here. Some of us. What more can I say? I've said everything. What is it that I didn't tell? I said they burnt us, they beat us. This telling can go on, but how much we suffered then.

* A stronghold of the Party, attacked by Razakars several times. A large force of the military attacked the village once and killed 88 armed guerillas who put up a stiff resistance. Many women were raped.

There were corn fields near our house. With that corn flour I was making some *rotis* on some stones. I did not go into the house. If they call, we will run, I thought and I was making *rotis* in the open. Because they would call out to us, saying come. They stared—like this. They were standing in the fields, the one next to my house, and they said, Oh, Buchaka - someone came this way! So we went to the carpenter's house. By the time they came she said, 'Let's go and stay in my house'. She was a brave woman. She said let's go, and we set out for her house. I carried the *rotis*. As we were going they said, 'Sister, we beg of you—it is four days since we ate! 'Where have I been able to cook? I have only a few *rotis*.' Then they said, 'Please give us a piece of *roti*!' I had only three *rotis*. But when they asked I gave it away. One came and I gave him one *roti*. Then another came and asked and I gave it away. All three of them jumped over the wall. There was a field there. They ate the *rotis* there. They drank the water from the pot and blessed me saying, 'May your belly thrive—it is four days since we ate! Now you ask someone else for some food', and they went their way—those communists.

Then there was a letter from the communists. Didn't we go now—he was in that *komti* (merchant's) house. They said no more of grinding flour, stitching leaves, sweeping or sprinkling [for the landlords]—so we didn't do any of that. Once the communists came, all that was stopped. They told us all those things. They wrote and told us, sang songs and told us, clapped hands and taught us. Our men were never at home. Not even for a day. Not even for a festival. There was never the certainty that with children and family one could cook a feast, celebrate a festival in peace and stay at home. As the food got ready, they were called and they went.

If the women were a little good-looking the landlords would send for them—in some places, not in our village though. Those landlords down there had plenty of land. They had plenty but they sold it. They didn't distribute the land or give it to anyone. They didn't give it—they sold everything. The government distributed the *banjar* lands. That was for the *madigas*. Who did they give it to? They gave it to the harijans. The Party would have given some forty or fifty acres on its side. Kondayya knows. All of them had an acre or two in those days. From the beginning it was like that. The *patels* didn't let them come. Then the police raped us and went.

They gagged our mouths with cloth. Threatened us and raped us. So that a word could not escape from our mouths. Because if we screamed someone would hear, they stuffed clothes into our mouths—our own clothes. They fell on us. My father and mother looked after me then. What could they say? They raped us and left. I was a small girl after all. I went weeping to my house and my father and mother took me to the hospital. Then I hadn't yet gone to my husband. I was still a small girl. Then after the Razakar time was over I went. My mother was from Tarigoppula. My husband never said anything to me. He looked after me quite well. They looked after me well in the hospital.

I roamed about alone in the forests. I was in Guntur for a month. They stabbed folk in the stomachs and in their rectums. They killed people. We could not stay in our houses—they set fire to our houses. She [pointing to a friend] was struck here. Her mother-in-law, Mallacca, was raped. She was not raped but she was stripped and her blouse removed. When they struck me with the rifle she also fell. We were all there. They put us all in a cluster. No question of you or me—all of us. We were pushed together. They wanted to collect some dry thorn bush and set fire to us.

No one came to ask us what did you suffer? Like you ask now. . . . What was your loss? What happened? I tell you—no one till now. They just shouted slogans and went away. No one asked us about our sorrows till now. They would ask us for food, eat and get out. If we asked,—'How long like this?' they would say, 'It has to be this way; we have to struggle for some time. The Party has to come and struggle and tomorrow you will have comfort.' So they would say. What comfort? The comfort of the grave! The men we had are dead. What comfort do we have today? What more than we had then? Who is there to toil for us and feed us? We have to work with our own hands. In this world those who are in comfort, live in comfort and those who toil keep toiling. I know no comfort. Those rapes and fires came to an end. Now that trouble is gone. We eat in peace and live peacefully. Perhaps a good government will come some day, but so far nothing has come. Anyway we wear our clothes and live in our houses. No running and hiding. That is some comfort. This whole village was with the Party. If they saw anyone from this village it was as if they had seen some poison. They would burn with rage. That was because the whole

village was one with the Party. There was no competition between people.

We were not afraid—we were about to sing songs. So when they said, 'they are singing songs, let's go,' some would say 'no, they may beat us.' It's forty years now since those raids. I was expecting my daughter then. My Komaravva and Sayavva were a month old. I gave my daughter in marriage to the Dommata village. She has two daughters and two sons.

We were all near the well. If we had a bead or earring we hid it and stayed with bare ears. Once in a way we would wear it, and they came! If the bracelet was tight they pulled it off. They chopped up the washerman. Although he begged and pleaded, saying he wouldn't do anything, they killed him. That whole family was near this well—our well. Some were buried alive. Buche Ellaiah was buried, wasn't he! Before his life left him they set fire to a pile of bush after tying him to it. Pedda Lingaiah was caught near the pig catcher's well and roasted alive—like a chicken.

GOLLA MALLAMMA: My name is Golla Mallamma. I was the mother of a child during the raid. During the Razakar time, I handed them stones and worked hard. My knees were broken. When I fell down and got hurt there was a big confusion. We suffered a lot. Do you think I remember? Look if you want to help us—help us. Now I am sixty years old. Do you hear? When they were thirty and jumping like cattle we gave them water. As they were running. Do you know? How to tell you? So many generations—we can't tell you. How can we tell you? We can't tell you all that trouble. No one asked us to do this or that. Who is anybody to tell us. . . to do anything? We thought we should save ourselves and did it intelligently. As they came to our well, they lit a match. They set fire to a cattle shed and killed people. As we beat our breasts and wept, they stripped us. So they made us dance *bathakamma*. Our fear was our own. We protested. We had to dance faster. Where were our clothes? We began to run. We kept saluting them and running. They went that way. We came out of the tamarind trees. Rajakka why don't you tell them? It was near their well. Rajakka will tell you. . . They burnt the ones they killed. . . They killed the ones they burnt. . . They burnt our house too. . . They burnt and killed everyone in our village. . .

GOLLA BUCHAMMA: My name is Golla Buchamma. My village—there were no Muslims there. Only one *dudekula* there. He went and told them of our village. I didn't talk at first. All the stories are the same! This is how it all happened. Our village has the same story. They burnt. . . they killed. . . they raped. . . What else can I say? It's all the same story. Do you think we can tell our story? No, we don't know how. . .

Dayani Priyamvada

My father's name is Ramakrishna Reddy. He had two wives. His first wife's children were Nagi Reddy, who died recently, and Raj Reddy. My brother, sister and I were the children of the second wife. The village school went upto class four, so father had us all educated till the fourth class. My elder brother, Raj Reddy and I were keen to study further, but as our financial position was not too good he was not educated any further—neither were we, and the desire to learn has remained unfulfilled. Our families were separate—the first and second wife's. But my mother, my sister and I were very fond of my elder brother. He also never felt that we were the other wife's children.

Once my elder brother left home. He was away for a year. Then my father got a letter from him saying he was in trouble. My father went and brought him back. Soon after he came back he got married. His brother-in-law was active politically—his name was B. N. (Bhimreddy Narsimhareddy). After a visit to his father-in-law's house, my brother had obviously discussed the Andhra Maha Sabha with B.N. and asked us, my sister-in-law and me, whether we would go along with him. Now my father was a very short-tempered man: a *chanda sasana* (tyrant)! He would never have tolerated the thought. So we just slipped out of the house without telling him. I was barely fifteen then. It was a very bold and adventurous thing to do, to leave home without permission. After the Sabha in Bhongir, some communist programmes were started. There was work to do among the peasants and the working class. We went around doing this. We were scared to go back home. My father was very fond of me and I was afraid he would not let me enter the house after I had gone away like that. Anyway, some time later we did go back. He scolded us a little but couldn't do much as there were three of us—the son, the daughter-in-law and I. So he changed his attitude a little. We used to go wherever there were meetings. It was after the Bhongir, Warangal, and Khammam

conferences that the Andhra Maha Sabha became more political in its approach. It was then that my brother was made the Party Organizer for the Bhongir area. Both my sister-in-law and I used to go around with him. But there were problems, difficulties.

The Kolanpaka Jain Mandir ran a school. They asked me to teach there. I used to teach the lower classes—the second and third—since I had studied only till the fourth class. I used to be able to read the *Bhagavatham* and the *Bharatham* and other literature. I was paid fifty rupees a month in the beginning. The Party was not well off in those days—they could not give everyone an allowance. My earnings used to support us. I worked there for a year. Then the Akhila Bharathi Kisan Sabha took place in Vijayawada. We went to that Sabha. By then the government had begun repressive action against the Party. It was then that some classes were held in Vijayawada. In those days the villagers used to think that communists were some kind of demons, that they would torture and change people completely. That was the propaganda then. Even if anyone helped the communists there would be such pressure and disapproval. It was then that they decided that if women were trained and then sent out into the villages it would be useful for the Party. It would be easier to get help during times of severe repression and underground life. If women didn't come forward and work that kind of help would not be possible. So the Party gave us such programmes. In two or three villages where the Party had some base they asked us to start working. We used to discuss family problems, wage problems, how to keep the house clean, how to care for the children and so on. The wage then was a *seer* (approx. 1kg) or a *seer* and a half of grain for the harvest. What did the Party stand for? We told the people that the Party worked for the days when hardship and inequality would go and better, happier times would come. Even if they did not understand everything that we said, they felt that we were working for their good and so they should help us. Because of this the people had to suffer a lot of hardship. In many villages others would ask, 'Why did they come? Why did you feed them?' But those who helped us would face the pressure and say that it was their business and they would do what they pleased.

I used to wander around in the villages of Durasapalli, Anasapuram, Bhaktavatsalapuram and Rayapadu in Suryapet. We went only to the villages where the Party was working. Later some

of us women got together and went to some new villages. We went mostly to the peasants and farm labourers. We even went to villages where there were no Sanghams. We were generally accepted by the people. Our family influence was also felt. My brother and B.N. were fairly well known, so people readily trusted us and felt that we were working for their good and that they should help us. They never asked us why we had come. Only when the government repression or pressure from landlords increased they would say, 'Please be careful, don't come to us when they are around, watching.' Our families were fairly powerful families right from our grandfather's time. My father was a police *patel*. He was very strict in family matters but very thoughtful when the village folk came to him with their problems. He settled matters of theft whenever they came up and did not hand them over to the police. And so from Tungathurthigudem and Ravulapalli, all the villages round about our place the village folk, both low and high, held him in respect. When we went to them later they were helpful to us. They felt we were working like our father.

We were given training in Vijayawada. We were encouraged to be bold. We were taught how to resist when the Razakars raided our houses, and how to withhold information that we women had about Party centres or hideouts. We were trained to keep chilli powder ready to throw at them if necessary, to mix poison into the food that we left behind when we fled. This was because even the Razakars had a problem for food. Not only did they loot jewellery, they also ate up all the food that they could lay their hands on. We discussed the problems that women face in society and how best to deal with them. We thought about how we were to take women forward. We had to arrange classes for those who were willing to learn. Sometimes the men were not willing to let the women come to classes to read and write, and not even to learn to sew. After all, women also have an identity and everything that happens in the family need not only be as the husband or parents-in-law wish. We would try and convince the families and also the women. We said that this teaching was for the good of the family and for the future. This was not to destroy anything. We held group meetings in every street and talked of these things. I worked like this for about a year. When the repression came I was in Suryapet leading an underground life. There was a woman there (from Ponugodu of Huzurnagar Taluka) who had lost her husband. She ran a small

hotel. I was asked to stay with her as that would not raise any suspicion. I lived and ate there. The Party paid her a little for my keep. After this I used to keep in touch with the families with which the Party had contact. I didn't take up any big programme that might rouse suspicion. I used to discuss housework with them, tell them that they should not stay at work from morning to evening, but leave definitely at about four or five. That they should go to work only at about ten or eleven in the morning. Also that when possible they should demand more wages—two or two-and-a-half *seers* of grain instead of the one-and-a-half that they were given. I also told them that they should insist on their right to go home and breast-feed their infants. This was because there were some farmers who did not send the women home to feed their babies. Some women had to leave babies of four and five months old behind without any milk. Think how a child suffers if the mother leaves in the morning and doesn't come back till after five! They would leave a little girl to look after the infants when they were away.

After the repression increased, we escaped into the villages with the squads. Then we used to identify and prepare families to shelter our comrades. We had to see if these families were capable of giving shelter and resisting pressure. Then we met these families, explaining the need to shelter comrades, how to keep them secretly, help them to escape when necessary, and avoid giving information when questioned. After all, if we lost the comrades we were seeking to protect, what was the use? So we spent a lot of time preparing these families. We taught them to resist the pressure of the police and the powerful men in the village. We couldn't do this for a long time. Maybe for about five or six months after the Razakars' repression increased. Then my brother had a baby daughter. It was impossible to even stay in the village then. My sister-in-law was also underground. The police gave my father a bad time and beat him up. 'Where is your son? And your daughter—where is she?' He withstood the blows but didn't tell them. He said, 'From the day they joined the Party I just thought they are no longer my children.' He had some connections with the Congress so he felt they couldn't really harm him. But he was beaten up really badly. Then we stayed in the *gudem* for some time. Then the Party issued orders for the women to go for underground work. My sister-in-law couldn't come as she had a small child. I

was the only one. They felt that without women it was difficult to get help and there was much trouble in the villages. Even the families we had identified as ours seemed to be gradually losing courage as the repression grew. It was in this situation that I got arrested, after about four or five months. It had been a long time since I had seen my father and mother. I went to see them. There was a toddy shop next to our home. Our house was small. Perhaps I spoke a little loudly but the police came at about eleven in the night and arrested us. The same night we were taken to the police station. The S. I. (Sub-Inspector of Police) was quite respectful to us as he was not quite sure of what would happen if he troubled us. He was scared of our Party and our politics. They were very decent but he was suspended later for keeping women in the lock-up for a week. Because it was our family, a few constables were also fired. They kept us for a week in the Tungaturthi camp and then took us to Suryapet. After a day they brought me to Hyderabad. I was in the Chanchalguda Jail for three months. People suspected of working for the Party in the other villages were tortured very badly. But in our village the families that were with the Congress and the Communist Parties were families that were together earlier. So they did not permit such torture here as they feared that this Party might come to power some day and things would go badly for them. So they did not allow it to happen. 'Where are your people? Where is so-and-so? Where are the centres? Where is B. N.?' they would ask. They tired me out for about two or three days. But they didn't try to beat me up. Food was sent from home. My mother, sister, father and all the uncles were all beaten up. They harassed them quite a bit.

I was arrested again just before the elections. This was after the Union Army came. This time also we were arrested at home. When we heard the police were coming, we went into the fields. We bound up our saris just like the village women did and couldn't be recognized. But the Congress fellows—Ramakrishna Reddy—pointed us out to the police when we were harvesting with peasants. We were taken away to the Secunderabad Cantonment Jail. We were kept in the CID office at Lakdikapool for three months. Then they took us to Nalgonda. I was there for five to six months. After that they took us to Khammam and then to Warangal. Arutla Kamala was also there. Lots of people were arrested then—for giving shelter or for carrying food secretly to the

comrades. They brought them in flocks—even the women. There was an 80-year old woman in a village called Medepelly (near Khammam), white-haired and feeble. Her grandson was in the Party and they tortured her for information, driving needles under her nails. But although they tortured her greatly she didn't tell them anything.

We were nearly three hundred or four hundred people in prison then. The food was really uneatable. So we protested and complained against this treatment. they said that we could cook our own food but then took Kamala Devi and me away to Aurangabad. They just took us away saying it was for an interview without letting us even take our clothes or things. We were taken to Aurangabad Jail where we remained for a year. There were two women called Karuna Choudhuri and Hemalatha Gupta there. After a year we filed a Habeas Corpus petition. After the struggle was called off, we all came out of jail during the elections. We took part in the elections. After that the Party did not give us any programme and we went back to our houses.

Talking of personal problems that came up—well, when we were working together during the elections I got friendly with one of the comrades. We had worked together in Nalgonda, Hyderabad and Secunderabad. Since we went everywhere together, whether for meetings or conferences or other work, we decided to get married. He seemed a very progressive person, but it seems he wasn't really, not at heart. Later, from his behaviour, I realized that he was more interested in climbing the social ladder—in making more money, going up in life. When we thought of marriage he just went ahead and printed cards without getting any clearance from the Party. I didn't even know about it till they were printed. I felt that this matter should be placed before the Party. The cards were sent to the taluk officer. The organizer there was a man called Dharmabhushan, he thought it over and felt that the Party was not in a really strong position there. It was just after the elections and there was repression—so he said that we should wait till things improved. He wrote a letter to this effect. After all it was possible to do something different, at least perform a marriage in the presence of a big Party leader, but no attempt was made. After the elections his attention turned to his studies. He went away as soon as the marriage was postponed and drifted into other ways I knew nothing of. Gradually the letters grew fewer and finally stopped.

The Party did not bother about this at all. It did not even inquire why such a thing had happened. I did not try to do anything either. The family atmosphere was such that it was not possible for me to go out and find out for myself. You know, don't you, how difficult it is for a woman to tread any ground without the help and support of a Party? It was not too bad at home. They did not harass me but they were pained that the family prestige was affected and did not try to get me married. Nor did I want any such thing. In all my emotional confusion, I did not try to take any step forward.

We make mistakes sometimes knowingly, sometimes unknowingly. Then, it is better to get over the whole thing than to keep on suffering. In that situation if my family had let me down the way the Party had, what would have happened to me? After all not everyone in this world gets married . . . I'm not particularly dissatisfied with this life of mine . . . I have no regrets that I loved him once and lost him . . . It was a bad dream. But if only afterwards I had been allowed to work in the Party according to my beliefs I would have found much more satisfaction. But that didn't happen. There is an aunt of mine, after her husband died, she came back and lived with the family . . . . Now I am like her, the same status—only she lost her husband and I was a victim of social injustice.

There was a criticism about the Party saying that there were no principles, no morals there. When we left home and stepped out, braving all this, we did so in the faith that there was a good future, a fine society coming in which all of us would live really well. We dreamt that in families there would be no such thing as women bending before men. We dreamt that we would live so freely and happily. But repression came so soon that we never had time to question whether that equality was there in the Party itself! Everyone went underground very soon. The men did not really share the work in the house then. I did not know much about sexual relationships in those days. Besides the atmosphere I grew up in did not permit me to think of such things. . . . I just did the Party work that I was given, read books and periodicals and did not have any other thoughts. Even when I heard the people around whispering about something I didn't take notice. I never understood what it was all about. After all we were all together in one place, eating and sleeping. When we were close or happy people would gossip. Not about the men, it was always about the women.

A few things did happen in the squads but they were always because both people wished it. No woman was ever forced against her will. Once there was a woman in a village near Bhongir. Her husband was in jail. When she was underground she became pregnant two or three times. Sympathetic people in the Party got her abortions. Luckily there were people who could understand her problems. They did not even try to find out who the person was before they helped her. So when her husband came out of jail they were able to live together again as man and wife. But one point that was clear to us was that men would be very stubborn, demanding, and so we were to avoid sexual relationships. If we were not careful we would lose the support of the Party. If the Party did not support us after all we would fall into the hands of government. The men in the squads were also warned that relationships with the *koya* women would lead to danger for the Party.

In those days whichever village we went to, the peasant women would say, 'We will come with you.' eagerly. In spite of that eagerness that people had the Party never felt that it was necessary to give them some training and get some work done. Instead they said: what can we do with you? How can we take you out? What can you do? and did not take them. In every village at least five or six women wanted to come—young, eager women. Although they were not educated, they were unhappy in their marriages, had problems with husband, sister-in-law or mother-in-law. They wanted to come away. In those days though peasant women could leave their husbands if they did not get on, but when they went home to their parents they would be married off again to some other man and it was the same old story.

They probably felt that if they came to the Party where men and women worked together freely, their lives would change for the better. They couldn't say all this very clearly but they felt that they could experience another life, live as they chose to. But the Party could not support them as it did not have a clear understanding of how to tackle the problem of women who left their husbands and came away. They were also not sure whether it was the correct thing to take such women away from their husbands. They were afraid that the Party would lose its reputation. It would have been good to support those women. After all the Party had a base. These women wanted to come away because they found their situation unbearable. So many women came willingly in those days. There

was a context then. Today if you talk to women what with these elections and this education, they say, to hell with politics. In those days if one did any good work it was appreciated. There was the possibility at that time for the Party to develop strong roots among women. But they failed. The women who came forward like that would feed the comrades, giving up their own meals. They used to feed us, carry letters for us, get beaten up because of us, and yet there was no question of membership for these women.

After we left our families and came into the Party we began to read a lot, both Party literature as well as books like Gorky's *Mother*. We gained the confidence to speak at public meetings. We spoke so well that people (especially the Congress fellows) would ask if we had B.A. or M.A. degrees. In one way if we had no connection with the Party we would have been ordinary women who knew nothing. After working with the Party for some time, when we were forced to go home, our sisters-in-law looked down upon us. We had the strength to put up with these difficulties. We learnt to turn a deaf ear to idle talk and live without caring for it. The strength as you can see was rooted in the Party. Because of our working in the Party and reading the literature we were able to understand the problems of society, the oppression in society, the situation of women and men; we were able to understand all this. We learnt to live without caring for all the pressures we faced. That is why although I lost something too precious to be lost, I still have an affection for the Party. Even if my life was ruined as an individual, the Party was not wholly responsible after all.

Although we did not know in the beginning what the Party was, we just felt we were doing some good work. By and by, as we read the Party literature, we began to understand about the government, we began to appreciate what a new society would be like with equality for men and women. We were full of firm confidence. We believed that this struggle which our comrades are fighting would bring us a socialist society. After the police action and the elections to Parliament, these dreams were smashed. Crushed like an egg. . . What a blow it was. . . . After the elections you know how we were—it was like the proverbial blanket which, when asked, 'Where are you now?' replied, 'I'm lying exactly where I was thrown.'

S. Sugunamma

I was just nine then. My sister was three years older than me. There were hardly any boys in our family. My (cousin) brother was eleven days old when his mother died. It was my mother who brought him up. She had had four of us—all girls—in a row. The two girls after me died. The negligence, so natural when there are all girls in the family, was at work here also! My sister was twelve when they started some classes in self defence. Chandra Savithri, Dr Acchamamba, Kumararaju Acchamamba, a teacher and a few others whose names I don't recollect were sent on this month-long training programme. Swarajyam from Telangana area, my sister from our village, and a teacher from Bibinagar also went to this training. In those days when there were very few schools it was very rare for a woman to work as a teacher. This teacher used to come to our meetings. We respected her a lot. She was a widow, childless. Later she was raped by the Razakars led by Kasim Razvi during the attack on the village of Bibinagar. During the attack the station master was killed. She died much later. They all went for this training in self defence. I insisted that I also go with them. I longed to learn something from my brother. Being a girl I felt neglected in the family and I wanted to get away. There was the feeling that there were too many girls in the house. There was also all the expense for us. However, my brother never made us feel that way. He encouraged me a lot and was quite fond of me. I wept and refused to eat for almost three days, and my brother reasoned with me saying, 'You are not yet twelve—they will not take you now. I will send you some other time.' My mother had no great independence at home. My aunt was the one who ruled the roost. My grandfather and my father were the dominant people in the family—my mother was nobody. My brother always fought this attitude at home. He said girls shouldn't be treated differently, they should be educated, sent to meetings etc. Usually in the zamindar families of those days one observed purdah. We couldn't come out

even in front of relatives. Even young girls were not allowed to come out anywhere. If we travelled anywhere the cart had to be curtained heavily. Despite that upbringing we had started playing with the boys in the school, learning all their games, even *kabaddi*. Our relatives would come and scold my mother saying that her son was bringing up the girls to be like boys. We didn't pay any heed. My brother used to insist that we come out, and that we serve anyone who came home their meals or coffee. All that was to bring some change. It was only through him that we came to know what the outer world was like.

Six months after that training there was a large *mahasabha* (convention) in Bhongir. That was the first time I saw such a huge meeting. How many people there were! Our whole family, even my father and mother, went for the meeting in bullock carts, and we stayed there for three days. The leaders then were Ravi Narayan Reddy and Badam Ella Reddy. My brother was their first disciple in Nalgonda district. Earlier my mother and the others used to be vexed with my brother for always roaming about, never taking any responsibility in the house and not applying himself to his studies. But when they saw this crowd—these people—they realized that he was doing some good work, and that he had so many people behind him and their attitude changed completely. They decided that he must be allowed to go his way. In the Bhuvanagiri Maha Sabha my brother made us perform a *burrakatha*. Wherever there was a meeting, he made us sing a few songs. In those days the *burrakathas* were about Tanya, Zoya, Jhansilaxmi, one about the story of Bengal and many others. My brother conducted a night school regularly. The bonded labourers on our farm were harijans. We were not allowed to touch them but my brother insisted that we touched them. Sometimes we pretended to hit them while teaching them their lessons. Some small programmes like this went on.

My brother also often said that he would put us in hostels and let us study but would not allow the parents to marry us off. My sister was fourteen and she had attained puberty. They were looking for a match for her. It was time for the Khammam Maha Sabha. It was the fourteenth one, I think, We wanted to go, but our mother and father refused saying Bhuvanagiri was nearby and they had also come, but Khammam was too far for us to go. My brother went alone. While he was away, my parents got my sister engaged to a

rich landlord. . . he already had a wife but she had tuberculosis; their village was Jajireddygudem. They even fixed the date for the wedding. I remember it all so well. My brother returned from the Khammam Maha Sabha, heard of this and protested. He said, 'how did you fix this when I was not here? He is a bad man, he drinks and cheats his neighbours.' He made a big scene. My grandfather said, 'what does it matter what kind of man he is? After all he has property and the girl will be happy!' My grandfather was the really dominating one at home. Even my father had no say. My brother said, 'I'll see how this marriage takes place! If you won't stop the wedding, I'll take the girl away and it is your reputation that will suffer!' The wedding was barely a week away and arrangements were already made. How were we to cancel this wedding? My people were so worried—landlord's family breaking an engagement! This would mean the girl would never be able to get married. They made a big fuss and wept loudly. My brother said he would see that they didn't get blamed. He would see to it that my sister said that she wouldn't marry. If she said she didn't want to marry him then they would have to accept it. But those fellows wouldn't believe it. They said that someone was either making it up or forcing her to say it. They said that they would accept that answer only from the girl herself if she said so to them. My brother took her into a room and trained her well directly. So she came out before them and said it. Their brahmins and elders were all there. They had come earlier with jewels and clothes. Now the whole lot came back again. It was a great wonder in those days! A girl actually saying that she didn't like a marriage! Many elders just came to gape at this wonder. She walked into that gathering just like that and said – 'I don't like this second marriage – I won't go through with it.' 'Why did you first agree then?' they asked, and she said that the family had agreed without her consent. We returned their gold and my parents started weeping; then my brother said 'don't worry, I'll get her married before this month ends.' He went to Karimnagar Jilla and fetched my brother-in-law, who was also a member of the Andhra Maha Sabha, and married them! Then we began to feel confident that our brother would not only do the work outside, but also do these things for us at home. We should listen to him and no other. Then my parents were quite happy since the man who had come to marry my sister was also a good man and it was all for the best. Now there was a general change in

feeling that whatever my brother did was for the best. There was no objection now—wherever he wanted to take us. At about this time he wanted to put me in a hostel in Hyderabad and talked to Obul Reddy Rangamma who was the Principal there. Around the same time there was a warrant of arrest out for my brother. He went underground. He used to come home in the night sometimes. It was war time and the silk from the parachutes was available. We used to distribute the silk to the villagers to make blouses. They were delighted as they had never worn any silk before.

We did jobs like this but refused to do the work in the house. There was no school in the village, so my brother took a piece of wood from everyone in the village; then he asked them to donate their labour and built a school which he called Dharmashala. He taught Hindi and English in those days. There was a teacher Bhadrayya who belonged to a Balija community. Everyone pooled in a little money and gave him a salary. He taught till the fourth and fifth class. Since there was no school in any nearby village – all of us studied there. In any school that was there, the medium of instruction was Urdu – Arithmetic, History, Geography were all taught in Urdu. No one knew how to teach in Telugu. Even if someone visited us at home, we spoke in Urdu. Neither the government officials nor police constables knew any Telugu. To go anywhere one needed to know Urdu. All this was changed in that school. They also introduced the Hindi alphabet and the English one. There are people who study in that school even today.

Soon after the British left there was the Police Action. After the British left, the Nizam was asked to join the Indian Union. Then the Razakars were grouped under Kasim Razvi to resist this attempt. Sometime after my brother went underground he came home one day. He came at seven in the evening. At exactly eight o'clock there was an attack on the Bibinagar railway station by the Razakars. They were led by Kasim Razvi. That was when that teacher I told you about was also raped. The village was attacked. Immediately a messenger came to us and said that the Razakars might come there also. My brother was there. Just before that people had been talking that the Razakars had been catching Hindus, provoking them, and then killing them. . . Beating them as they liked. . . Because of the spread of these incidents in the city, people from the city had come to live in the villages. There was a washerwoman from our village. She was married off to some one

in Secunderabad. She used to tell us all these stories. 'They won't let the Telugu people survive', she said. They would take away the gold, rape women, catch any woman who was going alone. Out of fear, many people came away to the villages. Not a film, not an outing, nothing was possible. The whole city was paralysed. There was a *padmashali* woman, a *kapu* woman, and the washerwoman who kept telling us about all this. We used to wonder whether this could really have happened. Then we wondered what to do when such things happened. And what to do if they began to come to the villages from the towns. We discussed all this. Even in the Party there was talk of how to defend oneself, how to keep chilli powder ready, and how to act when they came. That day my brother was also talking about these things. He said they would soon attack the villages. So he told us not to sleep in the houses, instead to sleep near the wells—out in the open. It was just then that this attack took place. I was twelve years old then. It was in 1947—I think. Then my brother asked us to go with him, not to stay at home. So we all went off together. Only two old aunts of mine were left behind at home. The whole village was empty. Anyway they went away after the Bibinagar attack. Perhaps they wanted to see the effect. The next day my brother held a meeting. All the people there supported us. There was no one who was against us there. He said, 'What happened at Bibinagar can happen anywhere. No one can help us. We have to help ourselves.'

Then a village squad was prepared and a security guard posted outside the village atop a tree day and night. If there was anyone approaching the village, they would beat the drum and all the village folk would gather. They would try to see that no one entered the village; if they entered then they would try to escape. The villagers kept their axes and sickles and slings with them all the time. They had chosen some of the youth in the village to keep a watch. In those days we belonged to the Andhra Maha Sabha, but we also had membership in the Agricultural Labour and the Youth Sanghams. My brother entrusted this work to the youth in the Sanghams and went away. Within four or five days of his going away the Party gave orders that all the documents that were at the village office should be burnt. The *patwaris* were sympathetic to the Nizam . . . that's why they took up that programme. The village officials had a gun, and a sword each. During the Dussera festival they would go to the *jammi* tree for Ayudhapuja (worship of

weapons), cut a goat with the sword and then fire the gun. Because of this the attack was directed first against them. That is, the squads would come and take away the guns. These guns were to be used against the Razakars. Everyone would give them up fairly easily. My brother felt however, that later he might be criticized for sparing his own father, who was both the village clerk and the policeman. So he came to him. In that village, ours was the only proper house. All the others there were only peasants or weavers. So although there were two official responsibilities, my father did both the jobs. So they first came to him, took away the files and burnt them in front of our house. Then they took away the few weapons he had. This happened first in our house. We found that a turning point. There used to be *vetti chakiri* at that time. There were eight men who belonged to the *madiga* community who performed this *vetti*. They would pound the rice—there were no rice mills then. They would also clean the rice and would be given the broken grain. When the men of the house were away, they had to come and sleep in front of the house; run ahead in front of the carts and so on. We slowly became conscious of the fact that these men were not being treated as human beings. With that change, we felt that if we set fire to the files it would be good riddance and the authority of village heads would cease. We took the files and gave them away. We were exuberant.

There was a man called Vankata Reddy who was originally with the squad. Then he joined the Razakars and he had my father interrogated in the police station about my brother's whereabouts. My father said he did not know anything and they could do whatever they pleased. He said that he stopped considering him a son the day he left the house. My father hardly came home and took off his shirt. Venkata Reddy returned in a van; all were anxious that my father would get beaten up. The neighbours said that the police van was coming and we should escape immediately. We all left hastily. But Venkata Reddy came after us in that van and he recognized me. There was a shepherd's hut there and I jumped into it quickly. Those folks said that if I was dressed like that I would be caught and then killed. So I wore a sari they gave me, with the end drawn over the right shoulder like a shepherd woman. I changed my blouse too. That is how they saved me. When the police went from house to house, somehow I escaped and spent the day in the outskirts of our village. Then my brother came the next

day and packed us all off to Hyderabad. Except my aunt, all of us came away to Hyderabad. The Police Action took place when we were there. The situation in the city was so bad that Hindus and Muslims wouldn't talk to each other: Even to fetch groceries from the bazaar we would go in groups of ten or twenty. We could not go alone. Men or women – it was all the same. It was so frightening . . . . We used to live in Secunderabad with some relatives. The house we were living in belonged to a woman of the Golla community. Her husband worked in the railways. She used to sell sweets, cigarettes and match boxes in a small shop. Then a neighbour who worked in the Air Force told us that there would be a bombing of Hyderabad and that Jinnah was ordering the bombing. Everyone was frightened. People from Bibinagar had taken houses for rent nearby. We all knew each other. They had already taken off their jewels and buried them – so that they wouldn't be stolen. Whatever little was left they threw into a well. They felt that even if we are killed, the Razakars shouldn't get the gold. They were so full of hate. Within an hour, the Muslims came. They started banging the doors loudly. They tried to loot the small shop that the landlady had. Then the Air Force man said, 'the women are scared, why don't you wait till the men come back.' They said they wanted cigarettes. She gave them the whole lot and they went away. But we were really shaken up. . . my sister-in-law was pregnant. . . her people were all here too. . . we thought let us all die together . . . . When the story about the bomb started, each one was giving out his version of what was to be done. Jinnah left – he escaped to Pakistan and although there was a siren when he escaped – no bomb fell. The Razakars' attack on the villages became very bad. Nehru wanted the Nizam to join the Union. The Nizam was not such a bad fellow, but that Kasim Razvi and Liaqat Ali were the ones who were responsible [for all the trouble]. The Police Action took place in September 1948 I think. Nehru sent the army. People in the villages went away to Vijayawada, Tenali and other safer places. There is a village called Cheetakoduru in Nalgonda district. My aunt's children lived there. Their house was burnt down. A man called Linga Reddy was burnt alive in a haystack. They raped four girls right in front of my aunt. Our village was also burnt down and all the labourers were beaten up. My father was also beaten badly. That is when we came away to Hyderabad. . .

On the day of the Police Action. . . . The owner of our house had two wives. His first wife had no children – so he married again. The second wife gave birth to a boy. Because I was so young, they were very fond of me. One P. V. Choudhury (General in the army) was bringing the Union Army. People collected in huge numbers to welcome them, and then curfew was declared. The government announced over the radio that people should come and identify their dead. The house owner, my uncle, and another man went together without caring about the curfew. Some of the people who went out were killed out of revenge. In front of two men, the house owner was taken away and we don't even know whether he was killed, because we didn't even find the body. They even searched among those shot dead – thinking he might be there , but there was no sign of him. To avenge this the Hindus went and killed a flower shop owner in Secunderabad. This sort of killing each other to settle some score went on for quite some time after. Later we felt that the Army had come, the Razakar menace had gone and we could go back to our homes. Even those who had gone to Vijayawada and other places in Andhra came back.

Those days there was a man called Pullaypalli Papi Reddy who left the Air Force to join the squads during the Razakar movement. He worked with my brother. His aim was good and he could shoot anything at a distance. His wife was well educated even in those days. She also supported him through all this. The people celebrated his coming into the squads, they were so happy. They were all talking busily, telling each other all the news – whose house had been burnt – whose hadn't. . . the living talking of those who were dead. After we went back my brother came with three squads. Each squad had about thirty people. On the whole they were about a hundred of them. We cut a few goats and wanted to cook a *biryani* for them. Then the Congress Military came in lorries. It was broad daylight. We had spread the leaves and were about to serve the meal when they came. Then my brother and all the others arose and fled. Earlier at the Party public meetings even my brother had said that there was no longer any need for weapons; we could achieve our ends through papers and petitions to the government. They had planted the national flag and the red flag side by side in our village. Within a few days the Congress had arrested and taken away two Party organizers in Jangaon. So they just ran away when these fellows came – the three squads.

The military folk came and asked my father what the feast was all about. My sister-in-law had given birth three days after the Police Action, and we were in Hyderabad then. My father told them that this feast was to celebrate the birth of the child. Then they went away. About a fortnight later nearly three thousand people came at midnight. My sister, my sister-in-law, the baby, my mother, and I were there at home. My father was sleeping near the well. There was another old woman in the house. The Sikh Military came and surrounded the villages – three thousand of them. Ours was the only stone-house in the village then. They came and tapped at the door. My mother opened it. They hit her. The old woman was asleep and they pushed her and prodded her with a stick to see if it was my brother. My mother said 'Why do you beat me,' and fell at their feet. Then she pointed to us and said that we were all her daughters. She was anxious that they might harm her daughter-in-law if they knew. So we learnt to tell such stories without any prompting or practice! They looked through the house and went away. They caught my father and thrashed him near the well. They kicked him with their boots, hit his head with the rifle butt and so on. They took him to Battugudem. Now I feel that they did all this to scare the people and make them antagonistic to the Party. They thrashed a few more people and took them all to Battugudem. My sister-in-law's sister lived there. Her husband was the police *patel*. They beat up my father and left him in that village assuming that he was dead. Some of our relatives there put my father on a cot and carried him home. He was unconscious. . . . We thought he was dead. We gave him some local treatment, applied raw egg and lime to his wounds and brought him to the Osmania Hospital in Hyderabad. They refused to admit him in the hospital as they were afraid of a case being filed against them. People were scared of even our shadow falling on them, be it relatives or others. So we took him to a private doctor – Ranga Reddy. He was related to us distantly. He put my father in plaster and sent us back. Then my brother came to know about all this and came to see my father. There was a Dr Ramachander Rao, who used to handle Party cases, even those who were underground. he treated my father and he slowly recovered.

I was fourteen years old at that time. I could understand the injustice of the government and the conditions prevailing. I had no schooling then. I used to read the Party books all the time. My

brother used to ask us to read about the Russian Revolution. Having read all that literature I was quite excited and filled with the desire to do something. My sister and brother-in-law were also in the Party. I don't know whether my sister was a member of the Party, but my brother-in-law was. He used to encourage us. Thus we too developed a negative attitude towards the government. We were watching the violence against women and rapes increasing all the time. So there was this strong need to do something. By then we had been in the city for nearly five years. On the one hand we had no connection with the outside world. On the other hand we could not go home to our village. Even if we did, we would not be allowed to cultivate our land. In the city, one of my younger brothers caught smallpox and died. These were some reasons for my wanting to do something. But then the Party decided to go underground. Again there was an increase in arrests, imprisonments and shooting people. Since some of the squad leaders were underground already, they had set up some dens. They used to send letters there (to the dens in the city). We used to send bullets and khaki clothes from here. I don't know whether they bought them or got them from the Razakars but my brother-in-law used to manage it all. A man called Kanta Reddy from Bibinagar used to come to take all these things. He was my brother's classmate. He was in the squads from the beginning. Our family knew him quite well. We used to call him brother (Annayya). I had contact with some dens. Kanta Reddy used to bring me the letters which I had to carry to the dens. These dens were located in Marredpally and Secunderabad. Mostly in the Military areas with camps there. They sent the letters with me because no one would suspect some one so young undertaking such a job. I used to be quite brave. I used to tie the letters to the cord of my underwear. I used to feel very pleased about doing something. Ravi Narayan Reddy was in the Nalgonda den. His daughter Bharathi was six months younger than me. He used to be very nice to me saying that I had nothing to fear and that I was like his daughter. He kept referring to me as 'my daughter.' He would say, 'if you have any problem tell me, my child'. Having made up my mind to do something, I told them that I would not stay with my parents. I then joined the den. In the same den Prasad used to take classes for the squads that came from the area. Earlier he had worked in the Jangaon Taluka and had come as the State Committee organizer. He saw me in the den and started shouting—

saying why had they let this girl come in? Everything would now leak out. But Narayan Reddy told him that I was quite bright and nothing like that would happen. He used to come—on and off . . .

When I carried the letters I had to cross the Military areas in Marredpalli, and Sikh Village. One day I set out at four in the morning. I saw the soldiers were out, running (for exercise). I was a bit frightened—after all they would suspect something if a fourteen year old girl was going alone at that hour in the morning. Anyway I went ahead with a stubborn courage. Narayan Reddy would advise me not to come alone at that hour and that I should have someone to accompany me. Occasionally Kanta Reddy would accompany me part of the distance. That was because he was not supposed to know where we were going. Later we came to know that he had betrayed my brother and got him shot. It was then that they asked me to work in the Party. My handwriting was also very neat. There was a lot of work in those days, cutting stencils and writing the news. So they said they would take me into the den. I agreed happily as I had been eagerly awaiting such an opportunity. My mother and the rest made a fuss and wept bitterly. They said that I should live at home as I was a girl yet to be married. By then, my sister and brother-in-law had already moved to another den. I was the only one with my parents. I used to feel very inferior that my sister was doing this kind of work and I wasn't. I used to quarrel with my sister asking her to take me along. So naturally I agreed readily when Narayan Reddy asked me to come into the den. My mother wept a lot. One of my younger brothers was dead. So there was only the other brother and me. My father also tried talking to me. He never chided us for anything. He used to just tell us things—quite pleasantly—he felt that either we'd listen or we wouldn't, that was all. After I came away—all connections with them were severed completely.

I was writing papers and cutting stencils in the den. By then I had completed my fourteenth year. But the Party had a rule that you had to be at least sixteen to join the Party. But Narayan Reddy put this specially before the Committee and said that although the girl is young she will be very useful. After they took me into the Party I stayed in the den, for nearly four years. Until 1951 wherever we went they told everyone that I was the daughter of Narayan Reddy and Sita Devi. This story was quite fitting as the three of us and the den keeper were there together. Around that time, SVK Prasad said

he would marry me. Before this two or three people had proposed, but I had refused. I longed to do some work. My brother also didn't agree. Although I didn't know all that much about anything, I was determined not to get married. Then the raids became very frequent at that time. My brother's health was also poor since he had been roaming about in the villages without proper food or shelter. His legs were covered with sores. He came for treatment. We were together for a month. My parents also came and stayed. That was probably the last time we were together. After the Razakars, we scattered and this was the first time we were together. Then my brother's health improved. He received a letter from one Sitayya, an Area Committee member. He wrote—'You are living happily with your family while all your comrades here are dying.' Seeing that, my brother set forth immediately. My brother's son was a year old then . . . Everyone wept as he left . . . . It's all so clear to me even now . . . . He said that he wouldn't stay a moment longer, how could he look after himself while so many comrades' lives were lost? He left . . . by then this Kanta Reddy used to come and go quite often. He told my brother that the day after the next he would send clothes and bullets to the train that left at four. He asked him to be there. My aunt hadn't seen my brother for a long time. So my brother and Hanumanthayya came to Bibinagar and sat on a fence between Bibinagar and the village. They sent Siva Reddy to the aunt's house in the village. She cooked a meal for these two. Many peasants came and met my brother, when they heard he was there on that fence. They all respected him. Apart from the Party activity, earlier he had worked either with the youth or some other group. My aunt sent them the meal. This Kantha Reddy took the clothes and bullets from our house as he had arranged. However he had already informed the police. The peasants had left for meals, it was around 5 p.m., and my brother was stitching leaves together into a leaf plate. As soon as Siva Reddy left to have his meal, they came—just two of them in civil dress. They didn't come in large numbers because people would notice. They came hiding behind the rocks for nearly fifty yards, and shot him in the back. He was facing this way and stitching leaves together when they shot him from the back. Hanumanthayya was on that side and my brother on this—one bullet went right through my brother. He fell immediately. He always carried a sten gun with him—with forty rounds. Hanumanthayya called out, 'brother' but

he just said 'Amma' and toppled over. This man picked up the sten gun and fired all the forty rounds. Siva Reddy heard the shots and rushed back from the village outskirts. Hearing the forty rounds, the police ran away thinking that there must be many more people. Sivayya and Hanumanthayya together carried my brother into the village, thinking he was still alive. The whole village gathered. But what was left there? A corpse. Our house had already been burnt down so . . . they carried his body to the school he had built for them. Hanumanthayya and Siva Reddy wanted to take the body away because they felt that the police would take it away. My aunt set up a wailing saying, what would the police do with the corpse—at least the family could come and see him. So they both left to inform the others that he was dead. In the night the military came; Kanta Reddy sent a message meanwhile to inform us that he was dead. He wanted to demonstrate his innocence perhaps. My mother was pregnant then—nearing time. All of us wept bitterly. He had left just the previous day. They all took a taxi and went to Bhongir. They didn't let me go. The Party members said no, so my parents and sister-in-law left in a taxi. My cousin Bhoopal Reddy who was studying in Bhongir and a few other students were arrested, and all of them taken away in a lorry with my brother's dead body. My aunt ran behind the lorry. The police kept scolding the corpse pulling his hair—saying 'how many more raids will you conduct now' and kept turning it about. My aunt wept bitterly and held their feet and said, 'don't torture my child even after he is dead'. They caught her and gave her a thrashing. They took the body to the Tehsil office. When the students went to see the body they threatened to arrest them as well. My parents first went home and then to Bhongir. There was total confusion. My sister-in-law had a small child—they might arrest her and so the people asked them to go away. To this day we don't know where they buried my brother. For two nights my aunt slept in front of the Tehsil office—begging them to give her her son's body. They didn't—and they didn't even tell her where they buried him.

Then the Party shifted me from that den. They said I should have no connection with the family as the police would put a watch there. So I never went home after that. My brother often used to say, 'Yes, we'll all die, and if I die then you still have so many brothers in the party. The Party is like a family.' Hanumanthayya used to say—'Your brother isn't the only one—we are all there.' In

those days all the comrades moved freely with each other. A month later, they shot Hanumanthayya dead. That was also a great blow. Like that, within six months they had picked all the Taluka Area organisers and shot them dead. One after the other. They were Padma Reddy, Suryanarayana, Ramachandra Reddy and others. There was a woman called Chilakamma. She was also known as Sharada. Her husband Sathi Reddy was killed by the Razakars and later she married Suryanarayana. She came to our den a month after she married him. They killed him also, a month after they killed my brother. After my brother and the others died, they had a meeting of the Committee. As they left they told me not to worry—they were all there. But one week later, they were all killed in the raid on Kapparayapalli. There was a young man, a *komti*, called Lingayya. He was attacked by a bear in the hills. He rolled over and fell down and got hurt badly on his limbs. After that he came and rested here for a month with my brother. He was so close to us. He was also killed along with Hanumanthayya in the raid. So the Party was like a large common family. We dreamt that the Communist Government would come—and all families would be communes like this. Never would we go back to these separate families—with each for himself. No, whoever dreamt that it would come to this? So whoever died we felt the same grief. Even now, when I think of those days—they seem so different.

Well those who died. . . died like that. The struggle went on. We got the news through the newspapers. Otherwise, we would hold a meeting once a month and give all the information. Around that time when we were underground some marriages took place. After all everyone in the dens wasn't the same. There were some unmarried men and some who had left their wives behind. After my brother died, I was shifted to another den, not with Narayan Reddy and Sita Devi anymore. Sharada and some others were there. Before that, call it innocence—call it ignorance—we thought they were all our brothers. Two or three of the men wanted to use me. Some of them were married. I felt greatly troubled that even in the Party people could be like this. After developing the faith that the Party was pure—nothing like this could ever happen, when it did happen, I felt that the only protection I could get would be through marriage. There was no one for me to talk it over with. My sister was so far away.

If I mentioned this to my mother she wouldn't have let me come

back to the Party. Sharada was there, but she was herself in grief—she had been widowed twice. And they were pestering her to marry a third time! How could I talk to her about myself? So I was in a situation where I couldn't talk to anyone. I thought it over and came to a decision. My brother-in-law used to come now and then. They told him about Prasad's request, I didn't know his real name or where he came from, neither did my brother-in-law. I was fourteen years old and he was thirty. But it wasn't really for marriage—or a married life—it was because I had to marry someone to find a solution to my problems. Even my brother-in-law said he was a fine man, an educated one, he had worked at the State level and so on. My sister also wrote saying that I should agree immediately, that I should obey the Party instructions, and not feel too bad if they couldn't come. Then I told Narayan Reddy also. Seeing that I was worried, he asked me what was troubling me. 'Did any one say anything to you? I am like your father, tell me!' He was very affectionate. I looked on him as a father and a guru. so I told him. I told him that my brother-in-law also knew. He said it was a good thing but I shouldn't ask for my parents to be present, or for an ordinary wedding. They would perform a Party wedding. I said that I had no preferences either way. Only D.V. (Devulapalli Venkateshwar Rao), Anantha Reddy, and Narayan Reddy were there. My wedding was over!

Then some more issues came up in the den. Kaprayapalli Sathi Reddy was in jail with a death sentence over his head. His wife Nagalaxmi was in the den. Sharada was also there. There was some problem about Nagalaxmi. Even now when we meet her she feels bad and cries. When it was mentioned to Narayan Reddy—he took it very lightly. He said that these should be taken lightly, issues like this would come up when men and women lived together and shouldn't be blown up out of proportion. He was also criticized for taking these things lightly. In the Area Committee den—many things like this happened. There was another girl—she was my age—her parents also worked for the Party. She got some disease after some such connection. My brother-in-law took her to Dr Borgaonkar and got her examined saying that she was his sister. He said she had gonorrhea and scolded my brother-in-law for having kept her unmarried so long. Not that marriage was a cure but at least it would have prevented such incidents! He prescribed some drugs. Such things did happen then. I couldn't bear these things. I

was repelled right from the start by such women. That such things should happen in the dens really troubled me. If communists can behave like this what does it matter where one is—I used to feel. I couldn't discuss this with any one because of Party discipline!

I was pregnant within a year of my marriage. Then they shifted me to Raj Bahadur's house. Because they were older, they kept me there. Also they suddenly felt that the den I was in was watched, so they vacated it quickly and put me there for want of another place. In the P.C. (Pradesh Committee) den Pratyagathma's wife—Satyavathi—had arrived for her delivery. That den was raided and all of them arrested. My sister and Nagalaxmi were also there. They put all those who were arrested in the dens in the same jail. That must have been quite pleasant. They had songs, games and classes. They were OK. But we watched one den after the other go and found it hard to bear. How were we to save those who were left, was the question. I was seven months pregnant. Nimmagada Satyavathi, Sharada and I were in the same den, for nearly two months our work was only writing and making copies. Once Anantha Reddy was on a cycle following D.V. who was in a rickshaw. D.V. couldn't cycle. He didn't know the way and he took the rickshaw in some other direction. Anantha Reddy was frightened. I had just delivered in Niloufer Hospital. There was a lady doctor there who was close to the Party and she looked after me very well. Sharada used to come to see me every day. I came home after seven days. It was five in the evening. Anantha Reddy came there in a panic saying D.V. was arrested and we should immediately vacate the den. Everyone there left immediately. Satyavathi had just had an operation of her uterus. There was Sharada and me. They used to often tease me saying that I had a young daughter and they would threaten to kill her to get information from me. But I was never frightened. In those days being arrested or being killed was an ordinary fact of life. It was as if—since so many people were going anyway—this was the normal state of things. So we could afford to joke about it. Everyone left and we were the only three left. 'If there is no attack come to such and such a place. If you don't come then we will assume that you are arrested,' they said. Then the three of us left in the clothes we were wearing, we said we were taking the child to the temple and then to 'spend the night' in a friend's house. Even temples were useful then. I knew nothing then, but Satyavathi was older and she told me to go round the temple, so that no one would

suspect anything. We sat there for some time, then took a rickshaw and went to another den. Indira was there. She had a one year old child. Although we had never seen each other's faces before we would create relationships and call each other sister or sister-in-law. Often we didn't even know the actual names of the others. Indira and I were very close to each other. I couldn't even bathe my baby. She used to bathe the baby. The baby had no clothes to wear. On hearing that I was married, my mother had sent me ten saris and a gold chain of three strands. The saris had stood me in good stead till then. We were leaving our clothes behind in each den. There was often nothing but the sari on our bodies with us. Indira used to give me saris and her daughter's clothes for my baby. There were a lot of accusations about her also. When some people had tried to establish relationships with her, she had reacted very strongly. She used to confide in me freely. Her husband was away somewhere. We would talk to each other but never tell the others. Besides discipline always stood in the way. So we became very close. I was there for about two months. Later because there were too many people there, I was sent to another den. That is, as one den after the other was exposed, they were all brought here. Nearly twenty of us there. So I left. Every place that one went to, there was a new story. Whatever was suitable we produced as a story. Either we said we were married or not. In any case even before I was married, I used to wear a *mangalsutra* and earrings. The next place I went to—there were two bachelors. But they had said that one was married and his wife had gone for delivery. And I turned up at the right time with a baby. The first day I couldn't give her a bath. I got soap into her nose and she couldn't breathe and I was stunned—I just kept crying! That man—Gangadharam—took the child to a doctor. He knew nothing about children either. We thought the baby was dead. But I was afraid of one thing—if I was caught, would they torture the baby in front of me? Could I bear this? Would I divulge information unable to bear the sight? But I was not afraid of dying. The question of bathing the baby was always a problem with these men. There was no one I could even tell. He [her husband] came there once. He stayed for an hour and left. Then he came the next day and told me he would change the den and went away.

Already there were discussions in the Party about the moderate and extremist trends that had emerged. So everyone was uncertain

about whether to stay in the dens or leave and get arrested. D.V. sent me a letter which said that I was not to worry and that I shouldn't lose courage. By then my husband (Prasad) was already arrested. Gangadharam who was in the same house knew about this. Thinking that I would be scared, he hadn't told me. This Sudershan was the one who had informed the police. He had been beaten up before he gave the information. He probably couldn't bear it and gave out the information. And so Prasad got arrested. Even the den in which Indira stayed, was raided and twelve comrades were arrested. Sharada and Satyavathi were also with them. This was reported in the papers, but I didn't know as we didn't get any papers. It was a week to ten days. Fearing that I might weep and make a scene and thus expose the den, Gangadharam didn't tell me. We had no contact with anyone. I had the gold my mother had given me. A chain, a ring and some small things. I gave them all to Gangadharam. He asked whether I would like to go home and he would clear it with the P.C. I said, I didn't want to go home. I was a little suspicious that my husband had been arrested. He didn't come there for so long. I got another letter from D.V. saying that I must have heard of my husband's arrest and I must be brave. I was stunned when I read that letter. I didn't know what to do. I was so disoriented. Even the messenger left as soon as he delivered the letter. I was all alone. I thought that I would be arrested next. It wasn't being arrested that was worrying but I did wonder what they would do to the child. Since expecting a raid, we had instructions to that effect, I began to burn all the papers and messages that I had. I didn't even feel like crying. I was very stubborn, I don't know why. Meanwhile Gangadharam came with the money. He asked why I was setting fire to the papers and I said the necessity had come. Then he said, I knew the fact but I didn't tell you. I thought you would suffer or be scared—So I didn't tell you. I wept a little. Later D.V. came along. He said he would keep us in the P.C. den. That was a very important den then. They said that only brave people were kept in that den. Already so many more had been arrested. And so they were sending us there. I said that I would go anywhere the Party sent me; I wouldn't go back home; that was not possible; besides I didn't like the idea. Even getting arrested and going to jail seemed better than going home, I would not return to a home and a family. Then they sent me to this den.

It was when I was there that the decision was taken to withdraw the struggle and come out in the open. This was the end of 1950 or the beginning of 1951. Even Sundarayya came to the den. Prasad was arrested but whether he was alive or dead or shot dead no one knew; not the Party; not me; no one knew. Every minute I wondered whether he was alive, and how he was—these thoughts worried me all the time, specially in the night. I used to weep. Three months later they said that they were withdrawing the struggle and I had to be slowly sent out; they were trying to send me to Poona.

I was sent to Poona for some time, and then I was sent to Madras to my brother-in-law's house. Once Anantha Reddy came to me and said that he had good news for me—my husband was alive.

After six months, or a year later, Ravi Narayan Reddy won the Parliament elections; they held a public meeting in Vijayawada. I wanted to go there and come away from Madras. But Narayan Reddy said, 'you have a small child, why don't you stay a little longer? What is the hurry?' But I just came away. I then worked in the Bhongir bye-election campaign. I was not given permission to visit my husband in jail. My sister was still in jail. Indira, Nagalaxmi, Sharada—none of them was released yet. My sister kept writing after she heard I had come home. There was still the hope that there would be some Party programme, something to be done. Although my sister-in-law protested and asked me to stay in Madras and study—they had even paid the fees in a tutorial college—I came away, somehow hoping my presence was going to help the Party in some way! My sister-in-law pleaded with me to stay there till my husband was released but I refused. One of my cousins was studying here. He came and took me and my child to our village. The whole village turned up to see as if I was some wonder. Then they said, 'She is not married, how has she brought back a child?' When I arrived there I had no *mangalasutra* or anything else to indicate I was married. Everyone who came asked to my face,—'How did you marry without even a *mangalasutra*? What kind of marriage is this?' I had no answer and I had never anticipated that this would be an issue. I had forgotten the village atmosphere completely. When they kept whispering like that I felt as if I had committed a crime. If my sister was released she would be a great support. Even my parents had started treating me with indifference. They felt, 'what marriage is this, no property, no

jewels nothing: as if she had no one, nothing at all of her own.' This used to disturb me. Then there was the economic question. I had no money—if I wanted to go anywhere or do anything. Once after Sundarayya and Basavapunnayya came out they held a public meeting in Koti. My parents said—'enough of your support, you've done enough, you can't go anywhere, just stay at home.' What could I do? I fasted for three days. I would just lie there weeping. Then my father asked my brother to take me there. I wanted to take up some programme, I wasn't going only to attend the public meeting. All these leaders were staying at Mysore Cafe. Narayan Reddy said—'wait till Sasirekha is released and maybe we can decide then.' I was not very free with Sundarayya. As for Basavapunnayya, you know how he is, he just tosses people aside so lightly. He was the same even then. He said to me, 'Amma, what do you want to do? Even we have nothing to do! Go and stay at home!' I was so shocked, 'What! They've used us so long and now they say "go stay at home".' How could they even understand what the situation was like at home? How could one even tell them? What suffering! What mental torture! I had left my studies, left the people who looked after me so well, and come back to serve this Party. Sundarayya also said the same thing. I was really upset. That was my first taste of suffering. At home it was like that and in the Party it was like this. At home when I said that I would stay at Bhongir and study, mother didn't agree. They said—'enough of study. It is study that has brought things to this pass.' I have given up after the ninth class. I did not know when he would come back. Then my sister was released. She had a little property—so she could do what she pleased and maintain herself. I was so dependent for every small thing and that upset me greatly. When I wanted to go to a meeting or go anywhere they would place restrictions on me.

Women often come into the struggle unable to bear the sufferings at home. The Party wanted to demonstrate the presence of their women to the rest of the world. And so they would declare that dowry should not be demanded at marriage and women should have equal rights to property. They treated the women as equals in the Party. But they never took up women's issues as political or ideological issues to be discussed and analysed. It was more like a ritual! But they divided the chores in the Party just as they did in the family. Some leaders used to dismiss these issues

lightly! Perhaps there was a flaw in their thinking. Even the dowry issue was dismissed as insignificant.

However the hierarchies in the Party remained. That's what I feel anyway. After all they never took disciplinary action against a leader! But we didn't have the guts to question that. Although we were all the same age we could never discuss our problems with each other freely. Especially, with older people like Nimmagadda Satyavathi. She would say, 'I never faced these problems. How can you face them?' Then we would feel scared. Not that she actually said that. It's just that she never gave me the impression that she would understand.

I have some opinions. I don't think women's organizations can survive without a political perspective. Look at the Forum of Progressive Women's Organisations—the one Malladi Venkata Subbamma started. I went to work with that Forum after a lot of argument within the Party. But that Forum just stopped functioning. A revolutionary party structure is necessary. It is only those who come with such convictions who can stand up to circumstances. Not everyone. In those days I wanted to study—I wrote to all the Committees, the taluk, district, city and state levels. They were satisfied with women flocking to their public meetings. Although I remained a member, I stopped taking part in their programmes. Although youth delegations went to the socialist countries, I didn't go. After 1962 his health has been indifferent. We also had financial problems, we sold everything we had. Our daughter was nine. Her future had to be thought about. In 1968 we came away to Hyderabad. Our work was finished anyway. There was nothing left to do.

Later I didn't even get in touch with Swarajyam. If I ever admired anyone it was Swarajyam. I heard so much about her. Ten years later when her husband came home I enquired about her. He said 'She's cooking and eating, nothing more'. I thought if that is what has happened to her, who will bother about me. That's all—no programmes. If anyone invited us for any social reform work we used to refuse pleading that Party discipline did not permit us to do so. So both socially and politically we grew isolated. But we never thought about liberalism. We were always immersed in the left. In 1974 there was a convention at Khammam. I had heard of the Progressive Organization of Women. My perspective was not very clear then. Because of family responsibili-

ties, I had no intention of getting involved in all those problems. My children always ask, 'What did you achieve? What could you do?'—and a kind of antagonism grew. I never objected to their ways. But we were unable to convince them. Even then they don't believe in God or hold to any blind superstitions. They are not against Marxists. However they do not accept the politics of today. My daughter refused to marry with a dowry and that was a registered marriage.

I have read a great deal—about Marx, Engels' writings, Lenin on women, Maxim Gorky's *Mother*, a Russian novel called *Ideal Love*—a must for all Party members—Sharat's writings, Ranganayakamma's writings, Chalam's *Stree, Kanya Sulkam*—all these. Those days I read the *Andhra Prabha* and *Jyothi* but the Party did not approve. In 1952 the Party asked us to read Chalam's *Stree*. But I didn't understand. I thought it was all wild stuff. I had no great interest in Chalam then. Sharat appealed to me then. My daughter also used to read a lot. I never tried to keep them far from politics. Actually they are slightly better than the other's children. It was because I read so much that I keep on thinking so much about women's issues. We used to discuss it then at home. When he (my husband) was in jail I used to raise these issues in my letters also. . . .

Pramila Tai

I spent my childhood in an orphanage in Bombay. I remember telling the Vietnamese that land once sold out and replanted does not take root. That was true of me too. Even as a child I was always thinking—I was not like ordinary children—I kept thinking all the time. Then in 1939 when the war broke out and Gandhiji started Satyagraha, I read all about it. I did not have any ideology but I read everything I could get hold of. I read Adhikari's article. He explained why Satyagraha was not the way either for my country or for mankind. That was the beginning. In 1942 I came to Hyderabad. I was the headmistress of Bansilal High School for Girls. Then I came in contact with the Communist Party. It was a banned party and its literature was not easily available, but somehow I managed to read some literature and thought, this is my way, this is the only way my country and humanity also can be saved. So I studied a little before I got drawn towards this. I came also because of my personal misery which attracted me towards the miserable.

I studied by myself and worked as headmistress of this school. B.A., M.A., all this I did on my own. I did my B.A. and M.A. from Benares. In 1942 I did my Intermediate from Benares. Osmania University was then under boycott because of the Vandemataram strike. Besides, it did not give any preference to women. I came to know that Benares University was allowing women, working women. So I did my Intermediate from there. Later on I did my B.A. also. Of course I did my M.A. after I came out of jail in 1952. Somehow it was a necessity for me. I never went to any college. Bansilal was the first Hindi medium school. At that time Hindi was also considered anti-Nizam though it was not—the *sahukars* and the rajahs were old lackeys of the government—but still that feeling was there. When I came here from Bombay I was just a matriculate.

I left this school in 1943. I worked only for one and a half years

because I joined the Communist Party in 1942. The Party saw my ability and my devotion and took me into the District Committee immediately. Naturally I had to leave the school to become a full-timer for the Communist Party. I was the only woman. There were no women's committees. Only afterwards all these women came. Remember, those were days of the war. There were some Congress women, women in the government also—Princess Niloufer and Princess Dureshawar. They used to give air raid precautions training. They asked me to help. First I said I wouldn't join them. Then I thought to myself: how else will I get contact with people? I didn't know anybody except my school children. I started with my children's mothers. Then I met all of them in their localities. Later there were also the Congress programmes—spinning and weaving. Then I started going from locality to locality, I started meeting women. Of course these were the issues which were not really issues touching our lives—women's problems like education. There was no education.

I remember we used to go from house to house. They thought I was trying to get their wives into this. Then came the Navjivan Mahila Mandal. Among those who started it were Yeshodabehn and Sarjubehn and Premalata Gupta. Premalata Gupta of course was the wife of Mr L. N. Gupta, a big official, but they were of a progressive bent. So this Navjivan Mandal, it was separately there and we had this programme. It was war time and economic problems were most pressing. I do not know how far it was correct or not. Princess Dureshawar issued rations of 13 kgs. jowar per rupee for widows. So house to house I went and issued coupons. Mrs Pathak was the head of the rationing department. With so many students and teachers I used to do this type of work. We organized cheap and fresh milk and sold it against coupons. Princess Niloufer was the President and I was the Secretary. We had two shops, one in Sultan Bazaar and one in Begum Bazaar. Of course this was there, but our daily routine was visiting localities and households, and finding out problems. Many women whose life was a drudgery, who were thrown out of the house, took shelter with us. Sometimes we used to help them with getting jobs, or getting married. We did all this at Navjivan Mandal.

In 1943 or so, the government wanted to introduce rationing. There was no rationing. In two days it has to be organized. Without ration cards you couldn't get any ration. How were we to

do it? The Communist Party approached the government. We said: 'We will help you with the distribution.' The government refused. So we went on behalf of Navjivan Mandal. We got nearly 4000 cards. We did that. It was the time of the national movement. In Navjivan Mandal we had all ranis, rajahs. We even had Man Kumaridevi who was the sister of Raja Indermal. National feelings were the main thing—we were all working for national salvation. As I said, the RSS women were also there, Congress women were also there, non-political women were also there. The main feeling was that we were serving women and that we were serving the national cause. Yes, we did publish the Navjivan Mandal Manifesto, its aims and other reports for our Silver Jubilee Celebrations. You can get them. We should ask Susheela Verma—Rama knows her. There are also photographs. I think she is the Secretary. I can phone her—or you can. Now I do not go there, so I do not have any direct contact. Mrs. Gupta is also here, in Basheerbagh. She is not keeping well.

How this Navjivan Mandal work helped Party work is a question which may interest you. I used to go and meet these women to talk to them. I also carried pamphlets and other Party literature in my bag, if I found anyone interested or inquisitive I gave them this material. That is what I used to do. Of course the other people would come to know, but what could they do. Our Navjivan Mandal alone had more than 2000 members from all Hindi-speaking communities. And for Telugu speaking people we had Andhra Mahila Sabha, because the language problem was there you know. Here we had Marathi, Gujarathi, Marwadi—all these. You know Vasudeva Nayak—a pucca Congress man—once he asked his wife, 'don't you people quarrel in your committees.' She said, 'no, we never quarrel, we have a programme.' That is true. In our Navjivan Mandal we had a programme and we used to follow that. We never took our communist literature there. After all what is the communist programme? To organize the masses, to awaken them—it is not just reading or distributing. That won't help. I have some experience. This mass work helped me a lot.

When the Party was banned, I had to support myself. Where could I go? I had no relatives here. It is the mass organization, my women's organization, my school teachers—it is they who supported me—why me?—not only me, but the Party, for five years, giving me shelter, helping me economically also. And it was

. . . I don't boast. . . it was not just these people but unorganized people who also helped me. Consciousness was there. Conditions were there. . . . How did we fight against the Nizam? It was not just the Communist Party. It was the United Front—all the way. Rich landlords were also with us. It was not just our credit. It was the conditions of the time—and the organizing skill of the Communist Party. Kamala (Arutla) and Satyavati (Nimmaguda) were there in the Andhra Mahila Sabha on our behalf. My problem was Telugu which I didn't know.

It was like this. Whatever programme there was, we used to first discuss it—Rangamma, yes, Obul Reddy's wife was there. She was a Congress woman. She was a very broad-minded lady. We used to meet earlier and discuss things. Like that we used to have joint action (NMM and AMS). For example, when the Suryapet firings on students took place, we organized a meeting at—what was that place—yes, it was Dilshad Talkies, I think. The meeting was banned but we all joined. Rangamma also, Navjivan Mahila Mandal also, Andhra Mahila Sabha also—and there were other small women's organizations like Karnataka Mahila Sahba and other language organizations. We had almost everybody except for the Muslim women—very few Muslim women joined us. The majority wouldn't come.

You know, All India Women's Conference was there. Its branch was in Lady Hydari Club. We used to participate in AIWC programmes also. All of us. Well, those who didn't want to come didn't come. Like Leela Mani Naidu. She didn't like all this but whether she liked it or not we used to get together. Once Princess Dureshawar organized a food committee. Leela Mani was her private secretary or something. We had all agreed to speak at a meeting and were asked to produce advance copies of our speeches. I would not give mine because if I gave it I knew they would scrap it. Immediately Leela Mani Naidu told her (Dureshawar) that I had refused to give it. She said, 'It does not matter. Let us see what she will say.' They also knew—everybody had their own inclinations towards certain things. That is how we found common ground to work. Dureshawar was a broad-minded lady though she belonged to a royal family (Turkish royal family).

When Mahendra was a student, this University was boycotted by all Hindu students. He went to Shantiniketan. You know the leftist atmosphere there. He left college and started working in the

Iron and Coal mines in Berampur. When the Armed struggle started he was asked to come back. 'We want our comrade back, they said.' By the time he came here Maqdoom had gone outside the state. Raj Bahadur Gour was in jail. None of the leaders were left. Mahendra was new to the place. He didn't know all the people or the places. I used to help him. But when the question of my shelter came up he said, 'we cannot provide shelter for you.' I was the last person to go underground. I had provided shelter for everybody. Dr. ——was also there. We shouldn't mention her name. She won't come back now—she is in London—but it is better not to mention her name. She was a close friend of ours and she used to help us a lot. Well, Mahendra said, 'We can't help you.' So I thought I would have to go to Bombay. I had only one relative in the whole world. This was in 1946..I felt very bad. We are in the movement—and in the thick of movement I had to leave the place. I didn't like it at all. As I told you, I had so many contacts all over the city, there was not a lane, not a place where I was not known. So I immediately got shelter. I arranged my shelter and arranged shelters for other people also. During that underground period Mahendra came to know what I was. Why did he ask me to go away, you ask. Well, he was a new person here and did not know many people—and generally you know [smiling] women are a handicap.

In 1946 I went underground. I was told there was an arrest warrant for me. In 1951 I was arrested. I was married in 1947 while I was underground. Yes, we had to ask the Party for permission. I don't know what they said. Sundarayya and all this big Committee was there and I had no chance to meet them. But suppose I am in their place. What would I think? That these two people want to join their lives. So, what are the plus points, what are the minus points? How will they be able to pull on? I'm sure they would have thought of all these things. They would have considered the personalities—it was an intercaste marriage—whether the persons would be able to stand the onslaught. Especially since we are in the thick of the movement. Whether we will be able to withstand all this rough weather. Anyway they did not raise any problem.

Which was the first party I joined here in Hyderabad, you ask. Well, the Congress was banned here and the Communist Party of course I didn't know about then. But I used to organize in Vivekvardhini Girl's School, in Narayanaguda Girl's School and some other schools. I used to organize locality-wise also. And this

was seen by some communists here who I did not know earlier. Then they contacted me. There was a Maharashtra Conference here. I was an ordinary member. But then they held a conference at Marathwada. I went there. There they saw the value of my work.

Let me tell you about organizing girls. First thing, locality-wise it's very difficult. One had to go to the schools. Nowadays when we organize students we raise all the other questions also: political, economic and so on. But then it was not so. Then it was the women's position—tomorrow we have to enter into the new life—how?—what do we know about it? What should we do? We must have freedom. We should not marry a person who demands dowry. Then, fighting against oppression. At that time also these were the main things. Was I living alone? [she smiles] Yes. Of course, my mother was there.

When I was underground I wanted to go to the field and work in the village. Really take the gun in hand and work. Of course that idealism everybody has. But my Party didn't allow me to. They said, 'You don't know the language, you are a city girl, you can't live in those conditions.' So they simply refused. So I used to manage this technical side. Get the shelters, get the couriers. Many times people who didn't have shelter used to come and stay with us. We used to manage their rations, manage their other necessities, and so on. Then sometimes I would translate—into English—when any Hindi or Marathi person came from outside I used to do the translations. These are the types of jobs I used to do. We were in Yakutpura then. There were only two of us. Yashodabhen and her husband and some other people also stayed with us. The landlady was very friendly. (Always wherever we went I didn't find any opposition, we were always friendly with the people. And they were always also pleasant and friendly.) I used to say 'I want some more rice.' She used to ask, 'Why do you want so much rice, you are only two.' I told her we had so many comrades coming from the Andhra side, they could only eat rice. And those days—war days—we could not get rice. We could only get jowar. Those people could not eat jowar. So we had to collect rice and send it for the comrades from Andhra. The Telangana comrades could eat jowar, but not the Andhra ones.*

* Jowar is considered an inferior cereal to rice as it indicates a difference in status.

Who were the district committee members when I was on it? Raj Bahadur Gour, Maqdoom, of course Mahendra came very late—and Jawad Razwi, Omkar Prashad and. . . I forget. Can I remember any incidents when I suggested a certain way of solving an issue in committee discussions, what the response from the others was? Well, we had women's centres in different localities—one in Secunderabad—and bal (children's) centres also. There we met a girl, Padma Naidu—you might have also heard about her. She was a young girl and very interested. So we depended on her a great deal for that centre. One day I was going from the Party office to Lady Hydari Club to attend a women's meeting. I was hurriedly going and suddenly I saw a closed cart. In those days bullock carts or horse-drawn carts used to be covered with a *chilman* from both sides. So I was walking hurriedly when I saw this cart—and someone lifting the *chilman* up—it was Padma Naidu. I was very surprised. I thought: why is she here, why has she come here from Secunderabad? There were not many buses in those days. It was not as convenient to travel in those days as it is now. I stopped the cart and asked her 'What are you doing here?' She said, 'I have run away from home, I do not want go back to my mother.' I asked her, 'Where are you going?' She said 'I want to go to the Party Office, but I dare not go.' So I took her to my home and left her with my mother and I brought this question to the Party. I said this is the thing that has happened. *All* the Party comrades said she should be sent back to her mother. I said no, I wouldn't send her. She has come of her own accord and with conviction. So we must talk to her. We must find out and give her proper work and in a proper place. But I was the only one who said this and my one voice was not very strong and she was unfortunately sent back to her mother and her mother rushed her to Madras and married her to some other fellow. . . . It's not that we did not look at the problem in the same way—what I found insulting is that they thought that if this girl is detained, then there may be scandals in the Party—that this girl is carrying on with someone and all that, so they objected. Men always think like that, and leadership especially. So I fought against this, but my voice couldn't win. She was sent away to Madras as I told you. After coming out of jail I met her on the street. She became a widow with four children and she started working in the RTC (Road Transport Corporation). Later on she worked with us, but she continued to

work in the RTC. She had to maintain her three or four children, so she worked in the RTC as a clerk. After I came out of jail I had my own worries so I didn't interfere—those who came to me I helped—but I did not interfere. My own worries were too much for me.

The other point I found out: while I was working in Navjivan Mandal, though I was educated—my whole background—I always used to feel a little. . . what shall I say?—a little nervous about it. No education, no good background. I was only a matriculate, and no wealth, nothing else and so on. I always used to feel, I must at least be a graduate. It will give me status. I don't know whether it was right or wrong, but it was there in my mind. So I asked my Party to give me two months leave so that I could go to Benares and appear for my examinations. They said, 'No, the movement is in a very high tide and we can't spare you.' Then I decided, 'Well, I don't care. Whether you allow me or not, I'm going.' And I went. They were giving me Rs 30. I did not take that money when I went away. I took my Intermediate in 1942, and 1945 I graduated. I went to Benares for two months and collected some books. Not all the books, but some. I studied some of them [she laughs], I got through. Because I did my graduation I could get a job after my release from jail—because I was a graduate. I don't think many people who participated in the Armed Struggle got jobs. Very few people. One among thousands, perhaps. Mr Gupta was very helpful, but how could he have helped me, if I had no qualification? I knew I was right. And no one raised the question of how I went against Party discipline. When I came back I became a Party whole-timer. Once we came out of jail, of course, Bansilal wouldn't give me back the job. By that time Badrivishal had become the Secretary. He was dead against the communists. His father had no politics—he had a soft heart—he was a soft natured man. So I did not go to that school again. I went to Dharmavant High School. By that time the Hindi Prachar Sabha had taken over Dharmavant High School and they gave me the job.

You ask whether my mother objected to all this activity. Of course she did. If I had this opportunity then [pointing to the tape recorder] you could have heard what she said. The day I left the job—because that was the only thing that sustained us—I have no relations, no uncles, no brothers to help me, my job was the only thing—the day I left the job, she was absolutely angry with me.

Her life itself was very miserable, so I had to stand it all. I have no sister. I had a brother who died when he was 14. If one is an idealist one has to stand all this. I would be the most obedient daughter, but when it comes to a question of ideas, that is it. I don't know whether my mother even understood me or sympathized with me. Unfortunately right from my childhood she never had any—say—soft corner for me. I had. I understood. Actually *I* was *her* mother. From very early on I understood that my father had left us and that it was my duty to fulfil his job also. That is why when I finished my matriculation, I had to leave and get a job. I couldn't study any further. The principal of the college asked me to continue. He said he would support me. I said 'no'. Yes I understood her. When my father left us my mother was only 18. After that she had no life, only a broken life. So I had to be sympathetic and tolerate her. But, at the same time, I had to stand for my ideals also. I feel that is the thing today's girls lack. This idealism. I see highly educated girls coming to the parent's places asking for things.

My mother died after I returned from Germany in 1969. That is why I could not say there longer. She was all alone here. She was with me all through the movement days. She was with me only. It was my duty to support her. When we are working for the whole world, how can we neglect her? I did so even when I was underground. We had two milk shops. One in Begum Bazar and one in Sultan Bazaar. I requested her to look after the shop in Begum Bazaar. She refused. All the while she suspected I didn't want to support her or something. I told her, 'Every day we collect nearly Rs. 150. There should be some reliable person. Until I find someone, please look after this.' I knew the storm was coming and there would be no one to look after her. And the shop would sustain her while I was underground. She ran the shop later.

Did it upset me that she didn't understand me? Of course. You feel it of course. Don't you feel it? You feel. She used to be very upset and very nervous, though I looked after her. . . but that—I used to feel very much for my father. She didn't like that. In my young age I didn't understand this either. Now I understand it. She had a miserable life. She never understood me. It used to puzzle her: why does this child like her father? A child after all would like to have both mother and father. However good the mother is, the child wants the father also. My mother mistook my yearning for

my father. . .that misunderstanding was there till the end—till the end.

And then—she didn't like this work of mine. Why is everybody who comes here crying? Nobody comes to this house with a smile. Everybody comes with some problem or some complaint or the other, or some worry. All this she did not like. I couldn't help it. She was a nurse. When my father left she put us in an orphanage, did a nursing course and took up a job. She brought us up. We were in the Matunga orphanage. Now I think it is being run by good people, but then it was in a very bad condition. For four or five years we were in the orphanage. I was the first child—I was born when my mother was 15 and then she had my brother. When my father left she was only 18.

We never really had a friendly talk. She never told me much about her problems—as a working woman, and so on. We never had a frank talk. We had a sort of animosity—and so I also, my nature is like that—if I find you not opening up your heart, I don't come and fall on your head! I keep quiet and wait for the proper time. Only after my mother's death did I find father's letters in her bag. She never told me also, why he went away, what sort of life he had. Only after reading those letters did I come to know what my father was. Then I myself went to Amaravati to meet Dr Shivaji Rao Patwardhan. Then he told me what my father really was. He was really a sort of saint. He couldn't stay in the world. Really without some sort of ideology, living in this misery is not possible. We can only become a Tukaram or a saint. There was a Muslim saint in Nagpur at that time—Tejuddin Baba. He joined him. I asked Dr Shivaji—who was living with us at that time—but he could not give me more information about my father, or about the family. I tried. But. . .after this stormy life—how is it possible? I tried. Went to Nagpur—the Samadhi of Tejuddin Baba was there—no one could tell me anything. I went there myself along with Mahendra. They said—you have come very late. They could not give me any information. For me it was not possible to pursue it. And I don't think it is useful now.

I learnt a lot from mother. Her cleanliness, decisiveness, her punctuality—all these good qualities I learnt from her. About household work—I managed very early on—say from when I was twelve—but we learn a lot from others—from neighbours also we learn a lot. My brother died when he was fourteen. He died of TB.

He got that in the orphanage. My mother did everything for him—she took him to the TB hospital in Miraj. When he died she lost her balance—she even started getting fits. In those days nursing was not like it is in these days. It was not an organized profession. They used to call for nurses from the orphanage. . . .I wanted later that my mother should work here, in a charitable hospital here. That would have helped her a lot. But she didn't want to. Pannalal Pitti was running a hospital here. She could have worked there—but she—I don't know why—something I could not understand. I think she felt I did not want to share her responsibilities. maybe it was a kind of protest. I cannot fathom her mind but. . .to my understanding it was like that. Because generally people want to work. Even now I want to work, but I can't because of my health. But when one is young, why should one refuse to work? We used to give some money out of the Rs. 30 we got to my mother and Mahendra's mother—whatever pocket money we used to get—we used to help. I don't know what she thought about our marriage. As soon as we got the Party's permission I told her about it. We were underground. We rarely met. So I did not feel any friction with her over marriage.

I used to move around with my comrades' sons wearing my shorts—half pants and half shirt—tying something in my hair. I used to take off my specs and go around with Mahendra because he did not know anybody. For instance, when Aruna Asaf Ali came for the first time, she wanted to meet our comrades. He didn't know where to go and how to meet them. So we used to go on cycles. We never had these scooters then. I used to sit with him—that's how we got acquainted. No, I did not ride alone. I knew cycling but I had no strength like that. I was a very thin person. So I could pass off for a man very easily. Even police fellows never suspected—except your voice there is no difficulty. The first time I disguised myself like that I was with one student comrade from Marathwada. He wanted to go to a shelter. It was a milk centre and I had to stay there. I did not know where it was either. But somehow we had to find out. This boy was with me. These boys—I don't know what these boys are—they are not brave—they are not clever. They have no brains also. Anyhow, both of us were going. The Afzalgunj area was surrounded by police; we went out from our back door. We were walking on Chaderghat bridge. This boy went to the police station and asked

them about our centre. But somehow those days the police were also very innocent!

You will also be interested to hear about the day we got married at Amolak Ram's house. All the Party people came. What marriage after all? Just announcing before the comrades—that is all. After that we wanted to disperse. So Mahendra and Omkar Prasad went away on cycles and put me in a rickshaw with purdah. I was coming from Gunfoundry and going to the old city. The policeman caught me there, at the corner—Abid's corner. He would not allow me to go. It was at 4 a.m.—still very dark. He would not let me go. He asked me my name. I was alone, so the policeman suspected—of course, the purdah was there—but he got more suspicious because of that. He suspected that I was a bad character and I suspected that he had found out who I was and where I came from. Upto 6 o'clock, till day break—he didn't let me go. He said come inside the police station; I said I won't come. I am a purdah woman. Ask your police officer to come out and speak to me. I had some papers inside the seat. I told the rickshaw fellow that if these people don't allow me to go away, you please take these papers back to the place from where you brought me. Those people will give you money. Those days people also used to understand a little. So I did not get out and those police fellows were talking about what to do. If the *amin* (sub–inspector) came, he would recognize me, so I told those fellows, after all you are Hindu fellows,—I touched that sentiment because there was no other way for me. 'What do you want, if you want money, tell me.' There were only three rupees in my purse. They talked among themselves and said 'O.K. give us Rs. 10'. I opened the purse and showed them I had no more, but I said, 'You come to to my house and I will pay you the rest.' They didn't believe me, so I gave them the address where I was living. That was a mistake, but I did it. Somehow they believed me and let me go. They took the three rupees. I went to the milk centre and told them 'I did this. I won't stay here, I will go to Lahoti's house which is nearby, but when those fellows come please pay them Rs. 7.' That was our honesty. [She laughs] I went away. Those police fellows came. Of course she did not give them money, she gave a good thrashing. Nobody like that stays here and this and that and sent them away. But they came again to Lahoti's house. Lahoti's brother was sitting down and we were upstairs. We heard all the dialogue. Of course Lahoti's

brother also thrashed them and sent them off but we were not sure whether they had gone away or were keeping watch. Later we took a taxi and went away and changed to another one. Such incidents also happened, many times. Only we had to be resourceful at that time.

Once these two, Jawad Razvi and Raj Bahadur, were in jail. They used to come to the hospital—Osmania—for medical treatment. Then we planned to take them—snatch them away—we planned everything. They came there. There was one Basid. He was the first man. He was supposed to bring them to a certain place, and from there I would take them to our shelter as planned. According to that I took those people, but [she laughs] I forgot the road. Because these roads—out of city roads like Banjara, I never knew. Meanwhile the petrol got finished. Somehow we got the petrol and I took them to our shelter. It was a big adventure to cross this Afzalgunj bridge. There were no curtains also to that car. We put on *chaddars* (sheets) and they were flapping all the way in the air. Raj and Jawad were crouching on the floor. But the police were so. . . hopeless! I tell you.

You ask whether I felt that I was treated like one of the men? Whether I was given important responsibilities? Of course, of course. What could they do. When all the important leaders had gone away, who was there to look after the Party office and the Party work? I was there. They had full confidence. Here, you know in the Communist Party, it is the capacity that is recognized. It was like that with me also. I had to fight for it. I had to show my ability. I will give you some examples. We used to stay in Begum Bazaar. Our meetings always used to take place at night—in Sultan Bazaar. I used to go alone. I would never ask any comrade to come with me. Now I might request someone to come—but—in those days, oh, never. You have to show your calibre. That is there. Not only here. Everywhere in the world. You find in the other countries also very few women coming into leadership. In fact once Lenin was asked why is it so. And his answer I always remember. He said, that woman when it comes to fight against the enemy, she fights tooth and nail, but when it comes to fight her own kith and kin then she succumbs. Then she hasn't got that stamina. We have to remember this and we have to prepare our cadre accordingly. I don't think that it is the fault of women that they do not show the calibre. No, no, not at all. See, if the conditions are favourable to

them, and even then they do not come forward, then it can be their fault. But generally the conditions are not there. In the world of women's organizations also, I have seen. Very few women come forward as leaders. Men also have not overcome that supremacy, is that not?

I never lived in a commune, but I organized them. Really there was no time for comrades to cook or do house work. We needed to engage a boy to do the cooking. Mahendra and Jawad would be the first ones to come and eat always. They could eat anything—even stones. You see, organizing ourselves into a commune is different. But that was a very difficult time, we had no time, spare time. One example I would like to give. Once I attended a conference at Jangaon,—the Jangaon Kisan Sabha—the first time I went out to a village in Telangana. I think it was in 1942 but it would have been '43 or '44. I can't remember. I did not know the language but I wanted to attend the conference. People were coming—men and women—they were coming—pouring in thousands. You can't imagine such a thing today. Only one idea struck my head. I asked Comrade Ravinarayan Reddy, 'These masses are getting awakened. But where is our organization? Can we organize them?' We had no organization. Because of mass enthusiasm they are coming, they had faith in us. But we had no organization. To that extent our Kisan Sabha was not capable of holding them together or educating them. It was a mass upsurge at that time. To this day we must always remember, if the organization does not stand the mass upsurge it creates a lot of problems.

No I did not travel around, not much. You know (what happened at) Akunuru, Machireddypalli. The first time I went along with Sitadevi (Ravi Narayan's wife). We went to meet the women and find out exactly what had happened. Because I did not know any Telugu, Sita also came with me. We went to Nalgonda. Our Party Office was locked. So we had to decide where to go and what to do. We had to find out from children. They took us to Venkatram Reddy's house. He was a leader. With him we went to that place—Akunuru. It was a horrible experience. All the peasant leaders—all the young people were outside in the field—and nobody could protect them. And women also had no idea that all this military, all the Razakars, will come and crash on them. After this incident we met Sarojini Naidu but she said, better Padmaja takes it up. So an All Party Committee was set up. Padmaja and

Rangamma also was there. All women's organizations and men's organizations also. Meanwhile an enquiry committee was set up. And then Padmaja was asking questions. We were all sitting. I said, 'Padmaja how will the women answer? Will they answer about their misery and shame there, before the men? You better take them inside the room and ask them.' Even then it is difficult—difficult even to tell a woman that this misery has happened to me. It was not easy for a woman to say. . . so the inquiry. . .

You ask what I felt when the Armed Struggle was called off. Well, it was difficult to meet to discuss what to do. What do you call him—B.N.—I don't know him by any other name—used to come to our shelter. The last time he came Mahendra and he had a discussion. I said it was not good to discuss things so loudly—but for both of them, the heat was too much. I only listened—because I was an ordinary person—they were big leaders. I was a District Committee member, they were State Committee members. And what was I doing? Generally working and feeding the comrades. Anyway. . . that is there—that recognition. . . will come to you only after you are gone from this world. So long as you are here, there will not be any recognition. Anyway. . . what was I saying. Huh, so they were discussing the Armed Struggle—whether to withdraw or not. B.N. said that the squads were working and that the people supported them and fed them and. . . like that he defended himself. I said, well even a *dakoo* (dacoit) gets these things. In Madhya Pradesh even a dacoit would get support. People *do* have sympathy. This is not the criterion. In the earlier period the people participated in the movement—that is how it was, exactly. That is why we used to say it is a people's movement. But in the last phase, because the United Front itself broke up—it was the Nehru military that came—so naturally, Congressmen—we can understand it politically also—naturally Congressmen's sympathy went away. The big landlords went that side and how many remained with you? I just said this. Mahendra of course said, 'You do not know all these details, why do you want to butt in?' I said 'Why not? I would like to voice my opinion whether you like it or not.' He was with us—but you know, a man wants to show—that he is . . . . Even now, even now you will find [the same thing]. Where are *we*? Will anyone believe that I would do so much work even though I did not have much strength? I can even do it now. It is there in me. But, [softly] it is the men's world today.

You ask how I conceived of myself—a fighter, a woman, a mother, or. . . well really—all roles. As I told you, when the time came to feel sympathy for my mother, I felt it. When the time came to fight for ideals, I fought. She is not my only mother. All humanity is my mother.

After my brother died I had typhoid. Serious typhoid. And then my M.C. (menstrual cycle) stopped. I was only seventeen—I said good riddance! I had no idea of my future without it of course, my doctor aunts and doctor friends said there is no serious trouble, it is not a disease, it stopped as a result of illness. We can give you medicines. In fact I took injections and all that to regain my M.C. . . . I also consulted Dr Acchamamba. I went to her. In Bombay I also went to a gynaecologist. It used to upset me sometimes. [Pause] Because it is not just one's life. It is also another person's life. I felt bad for *him*. Because if my life is miserable, I don't mind. My life is the people's life. So I don't think of myself. For him, I *really felt*. I told him also: 'You can find another partner if you want. I don't have any objection.' [laughs] The question of adoption also came up—but there was really no time. After coming from jail—there was a big burden on me—to support his whole family—then my mother was also there. There was no question. My in-laws are there in the old city, even now: his mother, sister, sister's children.

You ask what they felt about my marriage. I really don't know. In those days we were underground. I think his mother really did not like the idea. But anyway, they couldn't object. After coming out of jail, we lost his brother who was in Calcutta—there was his widowed wife and two children. Then he lost his brother-in-law—there was his widowed sister and six children. And no earning members. I was the only working member—woman. Somehow we raised the whole family, got the daughters married; got them jobs and everything—they are all right now. So from their side there was no objection—we come and go—even now.

That's why I had to do my M.A.—to continue my job. See, I was Headmistress of this school. And there is big competition in any field one takes up. Not only M.A., I had to do my B.ED. also. Without training you could not continue as a headmistress—nowadays even as an ordinary teacher. In my days I was the only headmistress with only Matriculation. So I had to do my B.ED., in Osmania in 1957. I did my M.A. in Benares in 1962. I studied in a

mission school in Bombay—Scottish Mission. The Principal always used to come and visit my mother—she used to tell my mother, 'Your daughter is so intelligent but she never studies English.' I never used to attend English class. I did not want to learn the language of Britishers. I had so much hatred for them from childhood. It was like that. Only in Matric I understood if I don't pass in English, I won't pass. Then I studied. Then I took English literature. So my teachers were very surprised. Is it possible? they asked.

I worked till I came back from Germany. That was in 1969. They offered me a job in a college. Then Mahendra was MLC (Member, Legislative Council) and we did not have any financial problems—so I didn't work. Yes, I did contest in elections, once—from a teacher's constituency. I didn't wish to contest. Somehow I don't feel that is my field. I want to do silent work. They are the people who can get votes, who can be bold and talk—those are the qualities required. I never thought I had those qualities, but I really did not wish. . . . But this Government Teacher's Committee they made a blunder. Officially, they said we will nominate a teacher candidate, and really they brought Kaloji Narayana Rao who was not a teacher. So the whole committee came to me and said I should contest—[she smiles]—at that time the Party also did not think that I had such support. But I lost by only 40 votes—that too from the districts. In the city I got a majority because in the city people knew me. In the districts it was not so. Afterwards I did not contest.

What did I do in Germany? There was this World Democratic Women's Organization. That is the centre. They have got ten secretariats—one of them is in India. Each country has to select its own representativ' They sent me in 1967, though I wanted to go much earlier—1967 was too late for me. I was really cut off from practical work in politics and even from the women's movement. I was hesitant to go. But that adventurous spirit was still there. So I went. I found it very difficult, because I was not really in touch with the present women's position in the world. In politics I was not afraid, because I knew each and every thing. At least I was alert, but regarding organizations, I used to find it. . . and my nature is not like that—if you say anything I say 'Yes Madam.' So I found it very difficult. But even then I was learning. It was a good lesson for me. Sitting here far away from Europe we can blame them. They suffered so much in wars. We learn all that also. Previously this

centre was in Paris. Later the French refused to have it there, so it was brought to East Berlin. It is now in East Berlin. I took leave for two years from my job and I had to go.

When did I stop working actively in politics? After coming out of jail, I had taken up a job. To meet women you have to go in the afternoons only. We decided that those who are able to work, should work, and we would give them our experience and support if necessary. But after coming out from jail the things were not so smooth. I really felt suffocated coming out from jail and taking a job. In 1952 we were released and a case was going on till 1953. Then Burgula Ramakrishna Rao withdrew the case, and we were free. But my political work, social work and educational work slowly. . .

Why did I withdraw, you will ask. Well, sometimes it was the conditions; then there is the question of time also. Sometimes help from your comrades is also important. If somebody could have helped and understood me then I could have done much more work.

Starting sewing centres and that kind of work was there later. But initially out of jail everybody was shattered—the whole Party was shattered. Our brains were also not working correctly I suppose. . . . But even collecting the women. . . there had been a big upsurge. I saw Muslim women coming in thousands. It was a rare occasion. In 1952–53 I went to a meeting at Baji's place. We had a sewing centre there. It is still there—of course not with my ideal. That is why I do not go there. But I meet her. If she calls me I go also. But what about the ideals we had in the beginning? Many girls used to come. Young girls—sometimes educated—sometimes not educated. This was in 1953. What I would do? What I would do—anywhere—even in my school is: I would study the people—I'd think, well this is a person who is interested and energetic and you can draw her into the movement slowly, not just into the Party, but into the movement. So we pick up the cadre, we educate them slowly. Like that we got so many young Muslim cadres also. Now you don't find them. It is a work centre. The centre gets people and trains them of course, and gets them jobs. Upto that point it is all right, but there is no question of a cadre coming out of that . . . . Before we were arrested we had the best students with us. After the 1950s none of the best came. . . . They wanted careers, futures. . .

Mahendra? He did not come home for days together. That was a very hard time. The Party was disturbed. All sorts of careerist elements also entered the Party. To weed them out was a big problem. To study the new situation was another problem. So Mahendra sometimes did not come home for days together. That was one problem for me—worry. I worried about what had happened, why he didn't come; I had to search and find out where he was, what he was doing—so. . .

Did men feel suffocated in the same way as I did? I don't know. Because you asked me the question I told you what I felt. I said the Party was shattered—but not in that sense. The whole Party was in jail. For instance, because of the Armed Struggle nobody—not even I—could get a house. When I was staying in MLA's quarters, 'Visalandhra' was announced. The announcement was that all those who are non-MLAs must quit. I don't know about others, but we did not like to continue staying there. So I and my mother, we used to go around—as soon as I got back from school—go around all the localities. Nobody would give us a house. Some were afraid; some mocked at me. 'Why do you want a house?' they asked, 'Russia will give you money.' We found two rooms here in this locality and later I moved in here. These people also didn't like us in the beginning. But I have been staying here for the last 26 years.

Mine was—see Kamala or Satyavathy, their position was totally different. Mine was—I had to support the family. I was the breadwinner of the house. I *had* to stick to my job. The government asked my institution, 'Why are you keeping her? Her services should be terminated.' I had to ask Sundarayya, what can I say? He said, 'You deny you are working in the Party.' These things also came to us because I could not dispense with the job. I know he (Mahendra) couldn't have got any job anywhere. At least my position and my work here in the city helped me get a job. Yes, a lot of men holding jobs did take responsibilities in the Party. But there is a limit to one's energies. Looking after a family, having a job *and* being politically active is very difficult. I couldn't do it. I could not do it. Meaning, I had no energy. I was anaemic. You have to sustain it all with will power. Mahendra would not have got a job even if he wanted. Also, he had never worked in his life under anybody. He wouldn't have been able to do that. He had no idea.

Did Mahendra share in the responsibilities of the house you ask?

What responsibilities could he share? He would never be at home. He would always be out—coming home at 2 o'clock, or 3 o'clock at night. I had to look after him—look after his food, clothes and health.

I really wanted—because I never had a home I was brought up in a charitable home—I really wanted to stay with his people. But he said no, those people will never understand you. Here ours is a free life. Now if I want to go out, I can go out. With in-laws—they are old-fashioned. So it is better not to go there. We took our share of responsibilities. Every time we would go and see what their needs are. We still do it.

Why didn't the Party think of any programmes? Did they lose many activists like me? [Pause] Please don't make me answer this question. I can't answer this. . . . Maybe the time will come when one can answer this question. This is an organizational question. Time has to answer it. It is better we don't speak about it. I can only say one thing. You know the Maharashtra Chief Justice? He met me. We had been to some function. He was also there. He asked me 'Why are you not seen anywhere?' I said, 'I am not doing anything, so I will not be seen anywhere. That is all.' And then he said, 'Because of you Mahendra could rise so much.' That is enough for me. Sometimes we can take that position also. . . [there is a gap—she didn't want organizational matters to be taped].

I used to write plays. I don't have them now. I read *Six Soviet Plays*. I tried to buy a copy but I could not get it, even in Moscow. I wrote some plays myself in 1957. *The Bread and the Lotus*—I wrote that in Hindi. Our own women members used to act these out. I haven't got anything with me now. In school also I used to write and direct plays and songs and everything. In Mahila Navjivan Mandal also. Now I don't know what happened to all these. Usually on the annual day there would be some function. I don't like children dancing and singing 'Radha'. Small girls singing such songs. I used to feel very bad. I thought as long as I am here such things won't be allowed. Then I used to write the plays and direct them myself—all to create a new atmosphere. Though you have authority in your hand you have to tackle these things also properly. In Navjivan Mandal our problem was educating women against polygamy or against atrocities on women. We used to perform plays there also. Udayam used to sing very well. There was a girl from Andhra who used to sing about the Bengal famine.

People used to cry. I don't know where the scripts are. Acchamamba used to have everything with her. She was the link between Andhra and Telengana. I stayed with her for two months.

Was I part of the trade union work at any time, you ask. Not in those days, no. Of course they used to invite me. There was this button factory in the old city. We led the strike there. Where was there enough cadre for women so that you could work in the trade unions? Now I work in the trade union field and not in the women's field. There was no time to spare then. . . . Yes of course, I remember Adivamma. There was a heroic strike in DBR Mills, I remember. But I met her only in jail. That is the only close contact I had with her. She was a very brave woman though she was not educated. She used to come to me some years ago for clothes and money because when I got the job I used to help people as much as I could. Even now I would like to do it. She used to come regularly. But of late she has not come. I heard she has two sons. She had put them into a Balasangham (children's home). She hasn't come for some time now. ... I have no energy to find out.

I do trade union work now. There are two unions—one is Royal Laboratories in the small-scale industrial estate. It is a pharmaceutical factory. I am the President of that union. The majority are women. The other factory is Bharat Metal Works. They make small boxes. I have been President of these two unions since 1969. The workers are illiterate. They have very little understanding about unions. We organized their demands and looked into their problems and we started taking up issues: economic demands, working conditions—that type of thing. About my point of view—about educating them also, about raising their understanding of society and of the country—that I haven't succeeded in—much—[very emphatic] that needs contact with the locality. That is the main thing.

What do I think of the present state of affairs, you ask. Well, it hurts you to think of that question. It is better to avoid it. . . . Have you met the others? You must have met Satyavathi—Kamala must also have told you her story. Karuna Chaudari was in the student movement but later on she went over to Aurangabad. You should also meet Hemalata Gupta, we meet once in a way, whenever possible. I have the same affection for them, pride in them. Even now Satyavathi comes once in a way. You should speak to Laxmi—and there is another man also—it is different speaking to

them—they pour out everything. We keep it to ourselves. 'Let the time come, let the time come,' we think. But you know they are not like that, they pour out everything. I think my understanding is like this: let us not create more problems. So keep quiet. Better keep quiet. I know one of the best writers of '*Our India*'. I met him before I went to Germany. He was very bitter [she asked us to switch the tape off while she told the story].

The question of self-criticism also—it must come in the proper place. It cannot be in public. The time is still not right. The left movement is not united—nor does it seem to be interested in uniting—that is why you should be very careful about open criticism.

If the left was united it would not have been like this. Firstly, the enemies do not want us to unite. Then there are the careerist elements who only want to be in the leadership. Then, we have not properly analysed the situation. There are so many factors. We have to stand united. Otherwise we cannot stand against the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie is not the same as it was before—nor is it the same as it was in Russia. They are very clever, very smart. If the left is also not clever and united it is disastrous. See what happens. Don't you know about the Latin American experiences, the African experiences? We have to be involved in selfless service. We cannot preserve ourselves and give to others at the same time. I'm talking only about the leadership. The cadre is not like that. The cadre. . . is always devoted. I have thought on and off about writing—when I was in Berlin, I came across two very good books on women: one by an American author and one by a British author. I can't remember their names. I took notes from them. I thought after coming back to India I should prepare some material—some pamphlets—for women. All that material has been taken by some comrades. Otherwise I would have given it to you. You would have also been enthused. American women—really they have so much fight—we laugh at the women's lib. movement but we have no idea. . . . There are many people going abroad. I asked them to get me some of these books, but no one. . . I used to take classes in Navjivan Mahila Mandal also. Not Party classes, but classes on women's problems in different countries. Of course we had a lot on India. We could also get some information from France and Russia and China. I used to write it all in Hindi. . . one comrade said he would get it all printed. I never saw it again. . .

You ask about the man-woman relationships in the Party. [She did not want her comment recorded]. There is another event that might interest you. There was a girl from the forest region—so to say. She was arrested and was put into the same jail as I was. Her name was Mallamma. I was alone on one side of the building. There was a big open space and the criminals were put on the other side. This girl was put along with the criminals. I asked that she should be kept with me. They refused to do so. Later I had to go on hunger strike to get her to stay in my cell. She was the daughter of a wage labourer. She did not even know how to name the days of the week: Sunday, Monday. . . . She had never eaten rice either, only drunk *ganji* water. She came from such a low strata. But what did she learn from the squad? Equality. That I am a communist and you are a communist, so we must have equal rights. Her other education was nil. It was a very unhappy situation. I mean it was a hell of a life. Hell. Both of us were together, but I couldn't sleep. She would always quarrel with the other women and then they would pull each other's hair and tear clothes. Then I had to intervene and say please don't, otherwise they would be punished again. All these things were also there. Political education is also very necessary. . .

We used to live in a big house in Brahmanwadi in Yakutpura. I told you, in the last phase, how anxious I was when they talked so loudly about the struggle. Other people had also told us that the house was being watched—to be careful. That night B.N. went away. I had told Mahendra to ask him to go away—because otherwise they would all get arrested unnecessarily. Mahendra had gone out for some guns at 8 o'clock. He didn't come back. The next morning he was not back. He did not come at night either. The third day also he did not come. I prepared to leave the house. It was a big house, we had no electricity. Our courier was in Secunderabad. I asked some comrades to find out about Mahendra. They told me that the place he had gone to was raided, but he had escaped. But in that case, I thought, he should at least have sent word to me. I decided to go to Bombay. I had no place now. All my shelters had got exposed. I packed everything—guns and cartridges. There were three full bags of cartridges. I was listening carefully all the time. There were vehicles passing, but I didn't suspect anything. Suddenly, at 6 o'clock they knocked at my door. With that knock I understood that the game was over. The courier

was very frightened. He hid himself somewhere. He was a dark man and they could not find him. I opened the door. Policemen. Welcome. They said, 'Where is the other man?' I said 'You find out. I have been sitting here, I don't know.' For nearly 2–3 hours they raided the whole locality, not just one house. So there was no chance of escaping. I understood this, but this poor man did not understand that. All these inspectors knew me. Before we left, one other comrade came. You know Shashirekha, Sugunamma's sister, her husband came for rice. The police asked, 'Who is this fellow?' I said I don't know him. But that fellow, with one slap he revealed everything. Everything. There were sixteen Andhra comrades staying in different places, they were all arrested. When we were arrested there was nobody else who had been arrested. I didn't know who this chap was, really. I tried to hurry the police up—make them take us out, because if any others come they would also get caught. After that, the Panchanama was done, and when we were taken out I raised slogans. 'Telangana Zindabad', 'Communist Party Zindabad.' People should know. They used to think we were merchants there. They should know we were not thieves or any other thing. Mahendra was already arrested, it seems. I didn't know that. We were kept in the bus for a long time. This courier was there and the other man. They wanted water. I asked the police to get water—they got it and gave it to me. I gave it to them. One of the policemen said that if we have a sister like this how nice it would be. I said. . .

They kept me in the police station for 35 days. Policemen would come, peep and see what I was doing. I used to just walk up and down. What could I do? It was terrible. Being in the jail is one thing, but police custody is terrible tension. The whole atmosphere was charged with tension. I sent word to my mother saying, 'We are here. Go to the court and find out about Mahendra, find out if there is a risk or danger to his life.' My mother, along with the lawyers, came there. We were taken to jail after 35 days. For me there was no physical torture but mentally what tension? You are here. All the doors and windows are closed. Nobody comes in. As the night comes, there is quiet, suddenly the doors are open. A lot of police come in and then comrades are taken out. They are tortured and brought back. You sometimes also hear the cries. They used to come everyday for interrogation. 'Where were you born? What is your education? Where are your comrades?' 'That is

for you to find out', How do I know', 'Why would I tell you? I am not a servant.' Then they would stop. One night you hear the people being tortured—especially the women—it is very painful. By 9 or 10 o'clock they opened my door, there were chairs: all of them came and sat and started asking questions: 'Where is Maqbool and where is Mahendra?' 'I don't know, if I know also I won't tell you. I am not your employee.' Like that it went on. Then one of them said, 'All right tomorrow you take her to Manganoor near Warangal, where there was a police camp.' I said, 'Thank you, I wanted to see that camp sometime.' Then they left. Afterwards I told the guard, when they come, you must give me some sign, to warn me, otherwise I am caught unawares. It gives you a shock when so many people come in suddenly. We don't know what they will do. But they only threatened me. I have seen this Adivamma—she was tortured: her feet were broken. They used to put chains on her feet and stand on them, press, dance—so many horrible things they used to do.

Did I take up activities like buying guns for the Party or transporting them, you ask. Transporting, of course. I was the key person here. Buying was difficult. Transporting without a woman was difficult. We used to have closed rickshaws. We used to carry the guns with us in this way. It was not necessary to wear burkahs, but we had a purdah over the rickshaw. Even Hindu women used to have purdahs. These *kayasth* women, *marwadi* women and others. I was never afraid. I used to remember all the heroes of my time: Sudhi Ram Bose and others, and get courage. I was very proud and brave. I will be completing 70 now. My health does not permit me much—I have spondylitis—otherwise I wouldn't keep quiet. . . let this not be the last meeting, come again.

Kondapalli Koteswaramma

Country, love of our country, our people—how did I first come to know of all this? My uncle worked in the Congress movement in those days. In school we heard songs about the Congress, the British atrocities, songs which said 'we don't want these white lords' and 'they fight with dogs to feed themselves.' It was these songs which made me feel an aversion for the British. I was also influenced by patriotic songs about the country. I used to feel how fortunate I was to be born at a time like that—to be a patriot. I wanted to vote for the Congress and they said I was only ten years old and I would have to wait a little longer before I could vote for the Congress! I used to attend every Congress meeting and sing patriotic songs. Then slowly the Congress Socialist Party emerged from the Congress. Summer schools and classes for the youth were held in Mantrivaripalem and other places. It brought a change in their consciousness. That used to be the Congress Socialist Party. Later it changed to the Communist Party. If the youth who are patriotic and can sing patriotic songs, and who are full of enthusiasm join the movement, it would strengthen the movement and give purpose to their lives. They were also encouraged to marry each other. I was also married to a communist then. After marriage, although we were committed to communist thought, to Swaraj, to the welfare of the people and believed that the white men should go, we could not come out and work openly for these ideals because our life was tied up with tradition and old customs. We were from Krishna Jilla. There the women were brought together to celebrate May Day and revolutionary festivals along with everyone else. We used to have a huge procession of women. All the women from nearby places would come to the Gudivada Centre. Then there would be a procession and a huge public meeting. At the meeting, we would sing songs. It was then that the Praja (people's) Sanghams were formed. In the Praja Sanghams we were told that we should form Mahila Sanghams and work as

women taking up women's issues—after understanding fully what has happened to women and how norms change in a changing society. If humanity has to survive we have to search for values that should exist in an equal society. One had to prepare the kind of literature that would help us. Veereshalingam said that 'Vande-mataram' was not a patriotic song. The song that Gurajada Appa Rao wrote—'not for personal gain'—was far better. We began to write like that. We studied this song, absorbed its essence and tried to write similarly. It was not 'belief in empty words.' We also tried to live that way—'not for personal profit'—a little—even if it is not possible to give up everything. So we worked in the movement for women. Then with the lectures we saw what was needed. Songs, plays, *burrakatha* etc., would lighten and delight the mind. So we set out like this. What encouraged us was the Party asking us to come and encouraging us forward. It was the Communist Party that gave us the enthusiasm and said to us 'come'!

Along with the women's organization there were cultural activities. In those days women did not take part in plays. They were not able to come into the theatre as easily as they came into the women's organization. Ravindranath's grand-daughter used to take part in plays. We held Bengal up as an example. This was how we started with the play, *The Step Forward* by Sunkara Vasi Reddy. We thought that it would not really be a step forward if men played the women's parts. Women should act the parts of women. Only then could it be called 'a step forward'. The big leaders encouraged us to take part in the play. We started putting up plays. In the beginning it was very difficult. We were scared. What would folks say? If we, respectable family women, came onto the stage, people might think of us as prostitutes. We were so afraid. Perhaps they would say, pointing us out in the bazaar 'this is the woman who acted last night' and mock us. So when I refused to act, Seetharamaiah went on a fast. He refused to eat if we did not act. Now where does a woman have the determination that a man has? If the husband does not eat she suffers. After all we had absorbed these values so completely. I do not know what the culture was like in Soviet Russia, but here, if the husband abused us we just suffered it. We had to do whatever he said. That is how I came into the plays. Yes, I did feel bad that he was forcing me into doing something which I did not like. But what could I do—we felt there was no escape, it was fate—and put up with it! We could act very

well in all parts but when we had to act with another man beside us as a husband we found we were unable to act! So the play was weak there. Then they would say that if the play was to be successful we should consider the men here as our brothers, that it was only acting. And so we began to act, and as the applause came, we also grew more enthusiastic.

Our comrades, friends and others around—us, they had said nothing would happen and brought us forward fearlessly. Before *The Step Forward* we put up plays like Gurajada's *Kanyasulkam*. We put up all old plays that had a progressive content. But these plays were only for us—we did not perform for the outside world. It was with *The Step Forward* and *Our Land*, when we performed for the outside world, that we felt scared. 'Nothing will happen. If anything happens do you not know how powerful the Communist Party is? Not just on our women, we will not allow a fly to settle even on other women,' they would say. So it was not just a political understanding, but through these cultural programmes that they brought about change.

More than our families and relatives, more than our old friends, the people in the Communist Party were like our family. They were our friends, our brothers and sisters and we all worked together. When we worked together, some of us in Mahila Sanghams, some in the Praja Natya Mandali, some in communes helping Bullemma, all of us sharing an understanding—we felt so good. And we felt, 'why bother about people whose ideas won't match ours?' We just stayed together with the people who suited our tastes and worked to spread and establish this all over the country. So we performed inter-caste marriages. Although widow remarriages were introduced by Veereshalingam, they were carried out on a large scale by the Communist Party. Even inter-caste marriages were part of the movement and used to strengthen and spread the movement. We used them to establish links across the country. A girl from Godavari Jilla would marry into Krishna Jilla . . . and then Krishna into Nandigaon or Guntur. There were four sub-castes among the Kammas, ten sub-castes for Reddys and among the Kapus—so many sub-castes. Not only did we encourage marriage across sub-castes but also inter-caste, inter-religious, inter-communal marriages. All this was part of the movement. We assisted and worked for all this. There was a lot of opposition outside—even though these people did not take dowry. They felt

that these communist boys had no jobs; that they would go to jails; they had no future and if their daughters married men who were not employed, but worked for the Party, their daughters would not be happy. Many parents felt this. But when the girls were willing, we encouraged them and brought them out. We performed many marriages like this. Tapi Dharma Rao's daughter-in-law (Rajamma) was a Brahmin. They wanted to marry her off to an old man. She came to us—weeping. We said, 'you do not have to worry, we are there' and brought her away. We kept her in the commune. There was no need to put her in a hotel or in someone's house. She stayed in the commune and took part in all the programmes. Later she took part in the Praja Natya Mandali programmes also. It was then that Dharma Rao's son, Mohan Rao, married her. This happened in many places—all over the State. This is just an example. So people began to see how happy the girls who married the communists were when they saw our families. We had criticism and self-criticism. The elders would intervene and set things right if anyone did anything wrong and that helped the young people to live happily together. So people also felt that their daughters would be happy if they married communists.

When you look at literature and think about how many women were actually able to write and how much they could achieve, it may not seem to be very much. We used to conduct a 'literature week' when the women workers used to carry all this progressive literature in bags and travel from village to village. There were no buses and comforts then. It's different now. Struggling under the weight we would carry them around villages. We used to carry Unnava Laxminarayana's *Mālapalli*, Sharad's novels, Premchand's, Veereshalingam's, Gurajada's work—and all such progressive literature along with the new literature that had just come out. A lot of progressive literature also was written at that time. Next came the literature from other countries. There was Gorky's *Mother, Anna Karenina, Nana* and so on. Then there was a creative movement in literature. From that creative literature came the new progressive literature. Many people came out of this movement. Krishna Sastri, Somasunder and people like them joined us. Sri Sri was the elder brother to this new literature. If Sri Sri was the Dronacharya, there were so many Ekalavyas in those days. Chalam's books were also read by some people—but we felt perhaps his ideas were not practical. But he did justice to women.

The problems women face are the same whether in these days or in those days. They have the same troubles. That is what I feel anyway. Whether the Communist Party came, or whether the Revolution came, women's stories and sufferings would not cease. If women had a real status, then men and women could be equal as in Chalam's literature. We all read his books. But how could we give them to everyone? It would not work. One could read Chalam on teaching children—that was all right. Chalam's short stories could be read, but books like *Stree* and *Maidanam*—how much of such stuff can we read and digest? How much could fresh entrants to the movement understand—and what good would it do? So we did not go in that direction in a big way.

We also distributed literature and books from abroad—books with the Marxist outlook, and on Marxist philosophy—in the villages during the literature week. We enrolled women members and made them read all this. We also used to sing progressive songs to the women. They were very happy to hear them. Where we held meetings we not only held lessons, but also collected subscriptions from them. Culturally, there was the Praja Natya Mandali, the Mahila Sangham, the children's Sangham. Different groups had their own organizations. All these people's Sanghams were influenced by the Communist Party. Those who were scared of the Communist Party could come into the Praja Sanghams. Some would say, 'after all, these Sanghams are also supported by the Communist Party'.

When things were like this, the war with Japan started. With the declaration of a people's war, many songs were written mocking Hitler and Mussolini. We used to go around singing these songs also. Sunkara used to write songs that were easily understood by the people. Gopalakrishnayya even wrote an essay on Telangana. There were some books and songs that could be easily understood by everyone while some were difficult. Somasundaram's *Vajrayudham* (Diamond Weapon) was easy to understand, but Arudra's *Twame Wāhām* was hard. So what were the changes that the writer had to bring about? The words the people spoke, the language they used—it was from here that one had to start. Gidugu Ramamoorthi Panthulu, Kandukuri Veereshalingam, Gurajada Appa Rao were the ones who realized this and practised it. They did a great service to our people and culture and are therefore worthy of the highest regard. Although they had achieved this in

their time, some of us were still not able to write as they did. We tried very hard to use them as models. The *Andhra Patrika* was our journal.

Then came the Bengal famine. We not only collected funds for famine relief but wondered what we could do from a human point of view. We composed songs so that the people could actually understand these problems. We went around singing these songs. We put up a play called *This is the World* by Sri Ramachandra Moorthy. I acted the part of 'Jeevachchavam' (a living corpse) in that play. It was very well received. Later we won the first prize for our play in the State Conference. I got the silver cup for the best actress. After the Bengal famine, when the Rayalaseema famine came, even actresses like G. Varalaxmi came and acted with us. Then we moved from our audiences to the Sahitya Akademi competitions where we used to win prizes. Then, our friends began to wonder why communist women were faring better than professional actresses. The Praja Natya Mandali was a good organization. Although they did not put up very big plays they worked very hard for them to succeed. To ensure that the plays reached the people, the Mandali not only brought the characters to life but merged completely with the characters when they acted. The reason for this commitment was the movement, and even outsiders recognized and acknowledged this fact.

After I had worked like this in the Praja Natya Mandali, Sitaramayya was shifted to another taluka. That taluka was weak politically and they asked me to go and work there. Well, the family was shifting—so we all went there. I worked there in the women's organization and in the Taluka Praja Natya Mandali.

After I had worked in the Taluka Sanghams, the Praja Sanghams, and the Women's Sanghams, taking part in all these programmes, my attention turned to the journals. We had a journal, the *Prajashakti*. Then there was *Janashakti*, before that *Kagada*. Tapi Dharma Rao used to work for *Janashakti*. *People's War*, and *Prajashakti* were the other journals. This was to keep up with the Bolsheviks. Although we did not know much about Bolshevik history, out of faith and devotion to the Communist Party, we carried on. As for the magazines, if one of us had a quota to sell ten, another would sell about twenty-five. Monthlies, weeklies or dailies— we had them all. We would throw them across our arms and roam around the bazaars selling them. We also sold

them at railway stations. We used to collect subscriptions. People would say 'Little mother, you who have never felt the touch of the sun, now why do you roam in the heat, working like this? What is all this—selling papers in the sun? What ill fortune ails you? You have fathers who are well-to-do. Your mothers-in-law are quite rich—why do you have to roam, collect a rupee here and a half-rupee there, to raise subscriptions?' People were full of sympathy for us. If they were acquaintances we used to say, 'that is none of your business! But since you are saying this, give us ten rupees instead of one!' They would smile and give us the money. Often we would say—'see when you were born you did not know of the Communist Party, now see how much its influence has spread. Soon you too will have to become communists.' They would then laugh. Some, just to tease us, would ask for magazines that we did not have. Something we had sold out. Then we would say, 'just wait', rush across and fetch it from some other girl selling it nearby. So they would say, 'bless you! We thought you could not get it—anyway why do we need these journals?' But we would insist on their reading them. Once in about twenty days we had a session for self-criticism, to check whether we had made any mistakes. After all, criticism and self-criticism are the heart and soul of the Communist Party! At least it was so then—I do not know what it is now. Even Rajeshwar Rao—if he made a mistake, we would question him about it very boldly. We used to call them petit-bourgeois characteristics. Even if we did not quite know what it meant, that was considered an insult! We forgot all the ordinary words of abuse that women generally used. Thanks to the Communist Party we developed a culture. Abuses based on caste, like 'you dead barber' 'you dead washerman' 'you *madiga* corpse' and so on, all these we dropped by telling people off. The new abuse was petit-bourgeois!

The Communist Party then gave a call. We all thought socialism was round the corner. We were all asked to sell our property and work for the Party. There were so many journals in the Party. If the journals were to continue, and if the Party had to survive—since anyway this property was not permanent, everyone would one day have equal properties, equal rights, economic conditions, surplus production, all this would come soon—many left their parent's share of property with them and brought their own share into the Party. They sold their shares, and brought the money to

the Party. Now many other young men, in their enthusiasm, wanted to do the same. But the Party would say 'if you want to give us subscriptions, first work for the movement physically and consciously. Do not do this in your first burst of enthusiasm.' Saying this the Party returned such contributions. 'After the Marxist outlook has really taken hold of your minds then you can give all.' So they would get very angry and say 'are you the only sacrificing martyrs? Aren't we also capable of such action? Why return our contribution?' But the parents were impressed at the maturity of the leaders even though their children were hasty, and their respect for us grew.

When I was just four years old, because they were afraid the Sharada Act was coming into effect, they got me married. When I was five or six it seems he [the husband] died. I knew nothing either about his death or about my getting married! My mother was very anxious to get me married again. She felt that if she got me married to a communist it would be good. When she got me married, there was a lot of tension in the village. Even in Seetharamaiah's village there was pressure. They were worried because his cousin's property would all go out of the family if he married an outsider instead of marrying her. So when he refused to marry his cousin they had to spirit him out of the village in a covered cart like a woman in purdah. In our villages the carts would have curtains in front and behind so that the women could not be seen. I was eighteen or nineteen then. My mother brought me up without my ever knowing that I was a widow. I came to know that only when I was much older and I saw my mother crying. I used to see other widows and think, 'so that's what it is.' Besides, I believed in the philosophy of Karma and I was afraid that the man who married me was destined to die. So I would say I did not want to marry. But the Communist Party boys said: 'no! no!'—they would show me families that were well and had children, after a widow remarriage. I joined the Communist Party after my marriage. My uncle's influence was very strong. Although I did not have a Marxist outlook I went into the Party. My uncle was already working in the student organizations. I used to sing very well then. I had a good voice and I was very bold and so they wanted to find a good husband for me so that I would be happy.

They were afraid that the older people would come armed with

staffs and disturb our wedding so they brought the groom to an area where the movement was strong and performed the marriage—in a leader's house. Many similar weddings took place in our house later. We were both the parents as well as the parents-in-law. Initially there would be a lot of reaction, but later they were accepted. To couples who had left home, Dr Acchamamba's house was the place where they delivered their babies since there was no way they could go back to their parents. Acchamamba's house was like their parent's home. She used to say—'why do you worry if your mother is not there—I am here after all.' She would deliver the babies and give them medicine.

There was a commune there. Food was served. We did not have to come back at midnight and then cook. Sometimes if there was a problem in the family and we did not feel like cooking—we could come to the commune and eat. There were nearly 150–200 members in the commune. So bachelors, men who were away from their wives, men who were working in the villages, and had come in for some work—would all eat there. When there were meetings or programmes they would stay back here. Bullemma used to organize the commune. After reading Gorky's *Morther*—we thought that Bullemma was really the 'Mother'. When we sold our property, we gave our parents their share, gave the children their share and gave ours to our mother—the Communist Party. Even Bullemma sold her property and gave the money to the Party. Even when she did not have a pie's worth of property—'you are all my wealth'—she used to say to us. There were others to help, but *she* knew each one's tastes and requirements. She knew who was ill, who needed exactly what. She lived in the commune. Sometimes if we were late, we would think: why disturb her, and buy some bananas to eat. Then she would say—'I know you have not eaten—here eat some rice and curd otherwise you will feel weak in the morning.' She was more tender and caring than a mother. The next morning if we were hungry—she would say, 'I know, you said you had eaten bananas because you thought there would not be any food.' Who else would look after us like that?

They held political classes for us every year. The classes were held in the Bharath Mahila Mandal Club each year. Now I wonder whether they didn't just go on without bothering if we had understood anything. Maybe we did not understand or digest anything then—I am not certain. I do not know really. Were we

really ready to digest all that information? It was like feeding hot *avakai* pickle to a baby on an *Annaprasan* day.

Let me explain a little: the Japanese war and how we were to oppose them, Russian socialism, its basis,—how did it spread all over the country, how did *they* understand it and how did *they* participate in the struggle, all this was not explained in depth to us, I feel. I am very troubled about it now. Because we stepped forward a little and took up so many programmes. But today in those very same communist families there is still a belief in God. . . Among the very people who entered into inter-caste marriages—the husband's caste wants the children married into their caste and the wife's caste wants the children married into their caste—this is the kind of competition that has come about. If they had kept their materialist perspective and really absorbed it, would they have performed all these pujas? How successful was the Communist Party in instilling their philosophy? Is this purely the problem of the individual? Many of these changes came in all the Party workers. What was reason for this? You see when they first came, they came with such a lot of enthusiasm and eagerness and worked hard. Once the level of activity in the Party went down, they all seemed to fall back. The people in the field will know why the activity decreased. After all I am now quite far from the Communist Party. The latter part of the story you know to some extent.

What I understand now is that it is part of nature. That there is unlimited power in nature which man taps and draws out through science. As science develops so also their thoughts and understanding. How far were they able to explain this? They explained politics to us—but it was like boiled iron pellets, not easy to swallow. . . . On what was this philosophy based? On what did it stand? If they had taken it from the foundations, the base, and firmly fixed it in their minds, made it take root, then many party workers, women or men, would have had the opportunity to stand firmly. International differences resulted in internal divisions. Even if there were splits, why did this loss of heart come about? Did they then turn to gods and *pujas* (prayer) because they were simply discouraged when we spoke so much against superstitions and blind beliefs? Or is it that the philosophy itself had not really taken root in their minds? I wonder now when I see these families.

Women first came into the movement following their husband's

footsteps. Yes, to a great extent. It was not because of any philosophy—Marxism or Leninism, or what they understood of it. It was because people had begun to ask the communist leaders why they did not bring their own women in, while they asked the other women to come. People said, 'first bring your women in, we will come later.' When they were called for public processions the women said, 'Oh! so we have to come out—while their own wives (communist leaders') wear clean *madi* clothes and sit at home.' So they were forced to bring their wives out. I came easily to the processions. Besides, my sisters, my people, were all there and we had big processions—it was almost like a festival. Then after we began to take a lot of interest ourselves, our men would say—'there are comrades coming, you do the cooking; it does not matter if you do not come for the procession; many others are coming; you have to do the cooking and so on, for them.' Then we asked, 'why should we cook? Why do you not go to a hotel and eat? So we don't have to come, do we? At first you forced us to come, and today, when *we* want to come, we are suddenly in the way. Go—go to a hotel.' Then they would say—the communists who were quite close to us—'It's not that, Koteswaramma. Just put some rice on, after all we have some pickle. Make only a little pepper water. We do not want everything.' They would say that about ten people would be coming to eat, but fifteen would turn up. Then they would feel it was not fair to make me cook more again and so they would bring some fruit on their way back. We would eat whatever there was, together.

In the Party we were all like sisters and brothers. There was a woman in the house next to ours whose brother-in-law had worked in the movement. We were like sisters. She had a baby boy and a girl. When I went out to work in the Mahila Sanghams and the cultural squads, if my baby cried, she would suckle her. After I returned I would nurse her baby. If I made a curry with gravy she would make a dry fried vegetable; if she made idlis today, I would make something else the next day. We used to open up a door that connected the two houses. We were not blood-relations but we mingled with each other. We did not know any differences or quarrels. Our relationship was through the Communist Party. We felt this was the real thing and forgot our actual relations.

We had training in self-defence in Vijayawada to protect ourselves against the Japanese if they attacked. We used to wear

khaki shorts. In the beginning we were nervous. Later the rowdy elements were all put down. Some learnt to cycle. Some took ARP (Air Raid Precautions) programmes. They had to persuade us to learn these things. We had to wear shorts for convenience. But when we had our periods we used to wear saris. We gave up silk saris and jewellery as bourgeois tastes. So we looked at things from all angles. Rajeshwar Rao's wife wears a golden necklace and a golden hip chain with bells. What about the others, would be the question. All problems would come to the organizers' wives. Whether it was singing or the stage, or acting in plays, or giving up jewellery it was first the organizers' wives who had to take the lead. These requirements came from the organizers of the women's movement like Annapoornamma and Hanumayamma. They really worked well.

Let us come to the differences now. According to Gandhi, we had achieved Swaraj. But after Swaraj the communists said, 'this is not really Swaraj.' So we had to struggle on many fronts saying that it was socialism that we needed. What we had was not Swaraj. If we really wanted Swaraj, then socialism was the only path. At this stage there was a ban on *Prajashakti*. All the workers were put in jails. The Party comrades had to go underground. Not everywhere, in some areas. The slogan was an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. If the Government puts out one eye, then we will deal with the Government and its stooges in the same way. An eye for an eye. Just as now we feel that socialism will come through the barrel of a gun, then we believed that we could do what they did—counter violence with violence. When we took up that slogan the Government banned the journal and arrested all the comrades. It banned all the *burrakathas* and plays that we used to put up. To oppose that, all the women came into the battlefield. Defying section 144, with the women workers in front, we mobilized all the women sympathisers and nearly a thousand women marched in a procession to the Collector's office in Vijayawada. They burst tear gas shells on us, lathicharged the women and took away some of them in police vans. They put some of the women in Nandigaon jail. We did not feel frightened even then, but because of the tear gas our bodies started burning when we were in jail. We had never experienced this sort of thing before. There were dark cells with no lights or air and our bodies were burning. Then we began to feel afraid. But as they brought in one after another, we felt death with

four others was as good as a wedding! And we started making a racket and mocking the police. We made fun of the Government. So the police would say 'our mothers, you have come to take away our lives, you are driving us mad.' Then they released everyone else, but booked a case against sixteen of us. They filed the case and we were shunted from Nandigaon to Jaggampet and other places. They would get the case adjourned once in fifteen days and they really tried our patience. Se we revolted and refused to sign the documents and said that since the case was adjourned we would not sign and we would not go away. We insisted that if this case was not heard we would just sit there and not go away. Then they threw us in jail again, but released us soon after with the assurance that they would hear the case.

Even in jail we carried on a struggle. Some women were taken to Rayavellore Jail. Even women with infants were arrested. Anasuyamma had a baby just 15 days old. She also came to jail. When they could not force us into the vans, the police said, 'If you have any pride get into the vans. Why do you stand like cinema dolls? Have you come just to shout or to carry on a movement?' Everyone got angry and climbed hastily into the van. Unable to catch and force us in, they provoked us into getting in. Some mothers of young ones would be called out and the police would show them small children to see their reactions. Even here we should have discipline—jail discipline. Wherever communists go they should impress people with their ideal behaviour—so we would ask them not to scream or shout, foolishly. We would make allowances amongst ourselves and wash our faces when we were allowed out. When we were let out into the yard, the Nandigaon jail would be surrounded with people on all sides. They would raise slogans and sing songs.

We once went on a hunger strike because on the fifteenth of August they made *laddus* (sweetmeats) and told us they had made all this for us as it was the fifteenth of August. So we said that we did not recognize this day as Independence Day. There was no real Swaraj and so we would not eat any food that day. They threatened to beat us if we went on a fast. We said that it was fine if they beat us but we would not salute the flag which was not our flag. They pleaded, threatened and tried many things. Later we were released after the case was heard. We did not undergo any punishment or pay a fine. Then our comrades took us with them. They said we

would not be allowed to live if we stayed here, besides women were also necessary. How could they manage without women? If there is a den with only four men there, it would be suspicious. A family would not be suspicious. Children would make it even less suspicious and so they took us away.

What did the women do? Actually there is no history without women is there? Right from the past, till today, there is no history without women. After all, women are not just half, they are the larger part of the population. For the movement to grow, it is women who are necessary. Women have a very significant role. But the role of men gets enhanced. The reason for that is the antagonism women have faced for generations. The role of women has not become evident, but they have been very useful to the Communist Party. There were days when we took comrades and hid them. Men get caught easily, but women won't be suspected so easily. . . no one knew at which station we got into a train and where we got off. We used to hide weapons in our bedrolls. We hid important information in the beds of old women. That is how the information got distributed across the State. Like transformed women we used to change our speech and dress—all those were our techniques. So many people knew they would be beaten up—be kicked—yet they gave us shelter—whether it was from kindness or devotion to the Party. Even though the Malabar police were around. . . they gave us shelter. We got food also. If women hadn't given us that protection, how would we have lived? They looked after us and tended us like that. Now whether it meant cooking for the men or going to the bank it was the women who did it. If jewels had to be pawned, it was the women who did it. No organizer travelled alone—it was always with a family and children that he travelled.

I came into the Party with so much gold. From my *mangalasutra* to my toe rings, the last bit of gold was useful for the Party. All this we did out of the consciousness that we developed later. We didn't do it because the men asked us to. 'Our comrades are just burning, dying like flies. Now why do we need all this? When they are dying thus . . . I gave it all away . . . on my own . . . .' They used to wonder, when the Communist Party is full of zamindars knocking off property why is this Koteswaramma giving away her gold?

We did not just cook. We took care that the secret magazines were not leaked out. If the Party bulletins came out they would

thrash us. After all those were days when both ordinary folk and Party people were shot down. At such a time, when the women were cyclostyling and making carbon copies of the secret bulletins, we came to know all about the State Committee, and the work of the All India Communist Party. We knew the whole history. That was a technique. When we made copies—we discovered that these people suffered from all the weaknesses that ordinary human beings suffered from: desiring women who had come of age, women turning round and rebuking them . . . apologies being tendered etc. The Party told these men, 'It's no use your staying here, go to the forest, go and take part in struggle programmes,' and sent them away. One should not talk of all this, but I'm telling it to you anyway . . . . Even now we don't have any sense, we felt. Helping them, looking after them like mothers, cooking for them in spite of the fear of being killed—and these fellows couldn't overcome this weakness.

During those days, Savithrakka and I spoke to Rajeshwar Rao and said that we would not stay with any of these men. Life or death—you keep us with you. After all, all the comrades are dying and we have also come prepared to die. Call it Hindu sentiment or whatever you want—just let us stay in the dens with our own husbands! Otherwise we will go to the forests and take up weapons and enter the armed struggle. So he said, 'What?—How can you hold a gun? Do your own work. The ones who hold guns, the ones from Telangana, are coming, many of them. Who will do the work in the dens? This is important for us; no one will bother you. Anyway we are making arrangements. Don't panic.' How did these women come to know all this, they sometimes wondered. If anyone was arrested, we were the first to know. We used to change our tactics as soon as anyone was arrested. Sometimes out of weakness they would tell everything. After a thrashing if they confessed then the comrades would all be exposed. When Podduri Somayya talked, eighteen people were shot. Then Anasuyamma's husband was shot near Dronachalam at the same time. So if anyone was arrested, we had to change the dens and shift the comrades. But our ill fortune was such, that after all that drudgery we would be left behind in the dens. If we were lucky and that den was not exposed, they would fetch us after five days. Otherwise not. It was not possible to lock up a den. Because then the CID would enquire. It was hell until our people came back. The next day around ten

o'clock a courier would give a signal and go. We didn't even take a bath as we didn't know which minute the police would arrive. We also didn't know what mad deed they would do—if they came.

As we made the copies we began to understand certain matters. The Stalin stamp had come. Some All India organizers went to Russia and met Stalin, we heard. This is not the time for struggle, he said. The conditions are not ripe for struggle. Industrial workers, agricultural labourers all should come into the struggle. The middle class intellectuals will become the leaders. Although China was a backward country, because of Russia's help, it achieved a revolution. That India could not achieve. For the present, one has to call off the struggle, was the big decision they arrived at. After that decision, the struggle was called off. The arms were all handed over. So we wrote a song which said 'the celibacy of weapons—so early! You boast after the rust has set in!'

We did not accept that decision. After losing so many lives, what is this giving up the struggle? We comrades wept at the thought of going to the capital. We could not go to Telangana after all. Now one after another was exposed. When the rusted weapons were brought out, some actually worshipped them.

Now after coming out they went to the villages and met the mothers and wives of the Marxists. Some of them said, 'Oh you are well, it was *our* children who died?' They said, 'You may have suffered underground, but we suffered a lot outside!' There were instances of rape. The middle class mentality is such that you can't speak of these things openly. Narla Chiranjeevi's wife was taken into the camp and released after three days. She came out screaming with wounds all over her body. So as we exchanged experiences we felt that perhaps the villagers had suffered more than us. They set fire to grain and set fire to property.

We thought Independence was in sight. We lost all our property. Now we had to go back . . . the children have to live, what were we to do? So they said, 'Do some business, take some nurse's training or take a sewing machine and look after the movement. After all who can run a business as well as an ex-communist. . . ?'

Dudala Salamma of Quila Shapur

I have made so many petitions. So many applications. Even to Indira Gandhi. But they didn't send me the money. Where have the papers gone? Where have they thrown them? Two years before the Razakars, my husband passed away; my children were that small. I was there right from the time of the Razakars but not a pie have they sent me. Whoever promised to help, I gave them money. I have become this old and I tell you, I walk with a stick. Why did you all come this far? I know—there are so many [of those who fought] in this district. Who got any money? There is so much to tell—my story: a house, courtyard and all. They looted—looted it all. I had a cot with headboard, woven with cloth tape and a large bed on it. It was a nice, decent house. I fed the communists and they said, 'you fed them, tell us where they are,' and tortured me. They hung me up with ropes under my arms, sprinkled water on the ropes and put a spiked board full of nails under me. My feet were split into bits [crying]. I was in bad shape. They tortured me so much.

I have one daughter. I got her married to a man from Secunderabad. One son of mine is in Bellampalli. He works in a coal mine. He has three sons and two daughters. He looks after his children. My limbs have been broken and cast in a heap—who will look after me? My younger son is also here. They live their own lives. They find it difficult to make ends meet. If I tell them to look after me, they will say: who asked you to go? Why did you go? What did you get out of it? He died two years before the Razakars. Did I have this much knowledge then? I had just these two sons when the father died. Yadgiri is the younger one. So when they tortured me I felt that rather than suffer this repression here it would be better to go away with the squads. I left one boy in my mother's house. My mother's village is Madaram. Anyway, people

will say what they will! One should work in the Sangham and die. One should be born to live with strength, the strength of our shoulders. How did my wisdom grow out of all this? Do you know how cruel Congress wickedness can be? Naked as the noonday sun! I kept saving my life from these troubles, escaping them—do you hear? I was caught because I fed them. My mother was here. There was a *mustedar* called Eddarti Yeeraiah. He caught me and said that I should show him where Gujjala Eeraiah and the other communists were. I had sent them all some food. I can't remember the names of the others. This is the result—just look at me now . . . .

You ask why did I feed them? Why have you come here to see me? Why do you roam about, for the Sangham or for women? I too wanted to do the same thing. At least you can read a few letters, but me, I used to graze buffaloes. I lived in the strength and faith that a communist survives on the strength of the shoulder. The struggle for gruel and water—I lived in such strength and power for it. I leaped five feet with Badam Ella Reddy. Badam Ella Reddy, Nalla Narasimhulu, Ananthapuram Macherla Yadagiri, Seelam Sarvaiah, Cheetakonduru Rami Reddy, Mukunda Reddy, Siddenki Narasimha Reddy, they were all there. Not one leader had a single complaint to make about me. I roamed about, travelling for the Party. I served it. If you ask what did you do—it will be there in the sufferings of those days. As far as I knew I helped the poor. But I couldn't do anything good. I helped. Where will these brigands let us eat? So I fed them all. I moved with them like a member of the squad. But they had looted my house too. It would have been a barren life. It was only because I walked along righteous paths that I was able to come back to this village.

My mother-in-law and father-in-law were also beaten to a pulp. My brother, he died because of me, didn't he? He was taken to Nizamabad jail, my brother. Why are you doing this to my sister. . .? They took him away saying he was a *pucca* communist fellow. He died of their blows. His record was all covered up in Jangaon—they didn't let it come out. He was called Madaram Balle Ramalingam. Even the people there will tell you. So many sufferings in the story of those days!

Where did I roam in those days? Which villages did I go to? How many years have gone? What can I say now? Akkirajupalli, Bairampalli, Goparajupalli, Madduru, Salakapuram, Pothareddi-

palle, Bachonnapeta, Siddonki, Ammapuram. . . may these villages prosper! I roamed all the boundaries here. They fly like hawks, don't they? I was in the squads. My life became good for nothing. Unable to see my suffering they took me away with them. 'Why suffer this torture here, why not go off to our Sanghams?' they said. I felt the same and went off with our people. Gajjela Eeraiah and I went from Shapuram. I was the only woman, who went. We are toddy tappers. I—Salamma. The sound of Salamma was like the roar of a lion. I fought like that—but not a pie has been sanctioned to me so far. I fought in this movement and collapsed. That's all that counts. Nothing else. Not a cow in the herd, not a rupee in my waistcloth, not even a copper chain on my neck. Look at my life. Look at these hard-working hands. I fall on this land and cry. . . .

Our squad had big leaders. Nalla Narasimhulu, Badam Ella Reddy, Pittala Narayana, Perumandla Yadagiri and others. They beat me up in this Keshav Rao's mansion. He knew English it seems —no Telugu. He did not know our tongue. He threatened that if we did not show them where the Sangham people were, they would put lizards into their underpants. I could understand a little. He's talking like this. What do I say. . . all these lizards, I kept repeating to myself. . . lizard. . . I understood. If they try and grab your head we should be prepared to catch them by the groin. What is it now? As for me I was so goodlooking then. I—in my youth—fit to jump four yards! I had two children then. My household was a fine one, full of pots and pans and cots. So many kinds of things. I had so much hair—such a huge knot. The day they caught me . . . my child wanted to ease himself. The whole place was surrounded by hundreds of military police—it was about ten or eleven in the night. A thousand people from the village can swear to it. We came to know we were surrounded. The children were small—such tiny eggs. I was lying on the cot, a pillow under my head. The boy and I. I had covered him with a sheet. There was no electricity then. All the women, brass pots in hand, going out in the dark to ease themselves, were whispering loudly—she is going to be arrested; she fed the communists. So I left with the clothes I was wearing. Where did my pets go? And where did my household go? I thought if I fall into the hands of the military it would be like going to hell. My sons will be harassed. At least going into the struggle would give me a name. After being called a communist, I

had to go into the forests. I made up my mind—my boy, under one arm, the pot in the other. . . as if to ease myself. I left the doors wide open. Over there was a *madiga* house—that far. The child in one hand and a pot in the other—I was marching along. Here there was a *medara* (basket weaver's community) house. I threw the pot into that house. I jumped over the wall there. There was a fellow called Srisailam. He is still alive. He swore he would shave off his moustache if he couldn't hand me over. Oh son, you are not going to catch me, I thought. I jumped across the wall and hid in the niche where the cowdung cakes lay. I sat there, crouching. The *madiga* family there was a man and wife—extremely poor. They covered me with cowdung cakes. I let down my hair and covered my face with it. I was wearing a good sari—so she took it off and stuffed it in one of the pots used for mixing cowdung with water and gave me an old worn sari to wear. I tied it round my waist. Even if I tell you these troubles, you can't see or feel them. I sat after it was dark until it was almost five. Then at about six they said we can't catch this bitch and left, leaving behind a couple of policemen to guard the place. In the evening again Razakars came. I was hiding in the maize field. After dark they posted some more men to watch. They said: how can she go out—she is still hiding here in the *madiga* houses. We must pour some petrol and set fire to them. There was one *madiga* there, he's dead and gone—Jangirigani Lingaiah. He said, if you set fire to this—we'll go. That whore is not in this house. Then he started abusing me aloud. He said that bitch is not here, not in this house or even this village—and all the time I was hiding in his very house. Do you hear? Well I crept out of that house secretly. I got to the well there. When I got to the well I got a message from Nalla Narasimhulu. They heard that I was caught and shot dead. Then the squad came with machine guns and what not and I left with them. Fifteen days after I left with them, the attack on Bairampalli took place. To tell you all this—all this detail—it is just at the tip of my tongue. I have survived to tell you all this—you hold the pen—it all comes from my stomach. What is the use of your holding the pen—my courage stands tall.

Although I suffered all these troubles—I never abused anyone or hit anyone. I walked only on the righteous path. There was one Duddenki Veeraiah. His wife Satyamma said that I had her husband killed—by the communists. Saying this she accused me before the people. I was in the squad. I didn't hold a gun—after all I

was a woman. It was all this work that one had in the squad. The work of the Sangham, meet this one, meet those there, tell them how to do this work, what to do with the land, to give the land to the poor . . . why do you need ten acres of land, give this poor thing two acres of your land and so on. We went against the *sowcars*.

I wandered with the child on my hip. There were so many with us. They all carried him. After all we were comrades. The Party means togetherness. . . ! All of us would go about together. Each would do their own cooking. When we were there in some forest or hill, someone would cook and give us some food. Our folk ran like calves. Where did I cook? Oh fuck . . . ! Cooking—no I never cooked. I wore a dhoti like a man, wore a shirt (to cover my tattooes on my arms) and shorts, bound a kerchief around my head. I was disguised as a man. One should serve the people. One marks the day one is born and the day one is dead . . . we make rituals. . . but forget in a few days. . . but to us communism is for several lives. It is like a low fever that never leaves you. It was out of such desire that I entered the forest.

We'd all sleep there together in the forest covering ourselves with a blanket. No, I was never afraid. After all, weren't they all there—our folk? We had some understanding. Even if they split our tongues—we never said that our people were here or there. We observed certain restrictions so that no one would get caught. We couldn't tell—we wouldn't. Twelve whole months I was in the forest. Then what happened was—I told you didn't I that Madaram was my mother's village? My brother had toddy trees. You remember Duddenki Eeraiah, he told my brother—'Ramalingam, I'll give you Rs 500, you just fetch your sister and her children.' He dinned this idea into him. Then he said, 'She has children, where will she live in the forest, go and fetch her.' And he sent him. My brother walked for a whole month, suffered many troubles and came to me. Here there was a village called Pachapuram. I said to the squad, 'now how is this?' Then he said, 'I will give my life for yours. You have son like Rama and Lakshmana. I'll set you up in your house. You stay in your own house. Your brothers have some land to cultivate. For your expenses and for your chidren's support—I'll send money. How long will you live in the forest like this? [crying]. You must come home definitely.' But the squad did not agree. They said 'how can that be?' But I said I'd go. It was two years since I had seen my son. I gave up everything [crying]. Let

my life go if it must. I gained nothing with this wisdom. A handful of food and cloth—that was all after all. And so I returned . . . my sister-in-law was making *rotis* . . . she gave me a *roti* as I sat there . . . I washed my hands and feet. . . put aside my blanket and bag. . . I had a half *roti* in my hand and I was still eating it. . . . One does not know how long they were watching. The police surrounded us. There is a mango tree here, a toddy palm there. I was near my people's house. They pushed my hands back and tied them to a tree. They tied me with ropes. They used some fibre rope and bound my feet as if they were anklets. They sprinkled water so that the knots would get tighter. My brothers, their wives, the children, and my mother and father, they were all there. There were scores of people. My brother was upset. He said 'Why did I coax her to come needlessly and do her this harm?' Then there were the lashes with the whip. They were so thick—woven stiff by the *madigas* in the village. Every time the whip was swung, it would go round me thrice. There were so many lashes . . . then they brought me to the landlord's mansion. There were nearly 300 of them—Sikh police and Mussourie police. I was caught by these fellows who came from Mussourie—damn them. I do not know how long back it was. The one they called the Havaldar Saheb. He tied me to a pole. If he hit me the blows would fall really deep, leaving welts on the hands I held lifted up to prevent the blows. There were grooves on my hands. The blood spurted all over the room. This boy was only this high. He kept shrieking aloud. The whole household reverberated with his cries. Then a man came wearing a dhoti. He filled my wounds with coal—you know, the coal used in the railways, not soft charcoal. And he bound them up with a piece of cloth he tore from his dhoti to stop the bleeding. Look at these scars—how yellow they are—all that coal is there in these. How many tortures they put me to! I was kept in that house for three months. This same Keshav Rao's mansion. Then my brothers, my sister, my cousins, all together signed a bond that they were willing to go to jail if I disappeared and I was allowed to go. Then I came to this house. I brought some pounded rice and fetched both the boys and came here. We stayed here. Then this Duddenki Eeraiah was killed. Who knows who killed him or why? His wife said that I, Salamma, had ruined her home—her name was Duddenki Satyamma. 'Catch that whore and bring her,' they said. By sunrise the military was taking me away. They brought his body there. They cast it before

the mansion and said to me—'You whore! you got him killed, this old man who is dead. We will put you also on a bier. I'll put my husband on one side and you on the other. . . . ' All this suffering because of her. I just kept quiet. . . . Then, after all this, I was at home. I carried liquor bottles from Jangoan. I pounded paddy. I didn't sit still. I worked for wages. The children were tiny after all. I put the older one through school till the 7th. There is a chap called Ramayya here. I put both my sons to work with him grinding herbs for medicines. They earned a pot of millets as wages those days [crying]. I really suffered in those days. I did not go to the Party and earn money.

And after all this, who do I tell my story to? Look how wonderful I am now—I can't even get up when I want to. I am at God's mercy. I don't tell anyone my story—not to my daughters-in-law, not to any human being.

Manikonda Suryavathi

I came into the movement because of certain social circumstances. I lived with my aunt who was married to Kadiyala Gopal Rao. In Kothapatnam there was a school run by Annaparaju Kameshwara Rao—an idealistic kind of school. My uncle Kadiyala Gopal Rao ran the school with him. The first political classes were held in Kothapatnam. Then some people were arrested there. Later there were classes in Narasaraopalem. Chandra Rajeshwar Rao, Gopal Rao and others were Congress socialists at first. The Party perspective developed during these classes. Since I lived with them, and they believed that women should develop politically, I went to the classes that they had started for women in Katur. (By then we had moved to Katur.) This was around 1936 or '37. These classes were specially for women. Nearly fifteen women attended. They held these classes for women at a time when there were no other opportunities for them to come out or study. Venkatram—Rajyam Sinha's father—Chandra Rajeshwar Rao and Gopal Rao were the ones who took the classes in the beginning. They seated us together and told us things like what a nation was, what the condition of women was, what the State was and why women should take part in movements. In Soviet Russia there was a communist government. They told us what the condition of women in the Soviet Union was like. They further told us how we should prepare the women here if we wanted the socialism that was there in Soviet Russia, and so on. For two or three days they held classes to explain to us how only in a communist society women could be liberated. Later they gave us more books about Soviet Russia. They gave us newspapers to read. Studying these and discussing issues among us was the responsibility of the youth groups. Katur was one of the first towns in which such classes were held. It was called the Andhra Moscow. In the days of repression, they stripped men and women and made them parade around the Gandhi statue. The women in front, and the men behind, naked. I was twenty-two or

twenty-three years old then. I was put into the Raya Vellore jail. After the classes all the youth in the village formed a Sangham and learnt to wield staffs. The women did exercises. The members of the Sanghams sent their wives and sisters to the classes. They believed that if men were to be emancipated, if they were to become highly conscious, then the consciousness should also spread to the home. This was an elementary aspect of their education. That is why all these families carried on in the same way, systematically, without making any mistakes or having any differences.

I lived there before I was married. The next year when the classes were held in Kothapalli, I was married. Well, they [her husband's family] were related to us in a way. Manikonda Subba Rao was my great uncle's son. His maternal uncles had gone to jail during the time of the Congress movement. My mother-in-law, Bullemma, used to spin the *charkha* (spinning wheel) and get others to spin. That was useful in those days. Then she came into this movement. She was called Gorky's 'Mother' by everyone in the Party.

In those days we were all asked to read Gorky's *Mother*. Everyone who came to the Party was told about the book and asked to read *Mother*. How did the revolution take place at that time? What part did the Mother play in the revolution? We were also to be prepared to play such a role.

After we came into the Party we had the idea that we should start Mahila Sanghams because there were bourgeois Mahila Sanghams then. Educated women used to start clubs and not allow ordinary women to join. So we wanted to start Sanghams for the women who were agricultural labourers or poor peasants in the villages. In 1936 they started the Krishna Jilla Mahila Sangham. Katragadda Hanumayyamma and Chandra Savithramma were in that. I was not there. I didn't know much about it. After I joined, Nagalla Rajeshwaramma was taken into that Committee.

Later they started a school in Mantrivaripalem in Guntur Jilla. They felt that children shouldn't be beaten or abused and so they started an ideal school, building some huts in a mango grove. Manikonda Subba Rao and others were also teachers in that school. As we were doing this, in 1939, I was given membership in the Party. Later there were some problems there. Once the trouble started they left the school. Many others followed saying that they would not stay on after these people left. So the school had to be

closed in two or three years. Then we came away to Nandamuru. Before we went there the Government had no watch on that village. So the secret Jilla centre was in our house. No one knew that it was there. After we were married, I was made the Jilla Mahila Sangham Secretary in 1941. Soon we became a matter of interest for the police. Why would they make someone who did not know anything, [who was ignorant] a Mahila Sangham Secretary? So the police decided to watch out for my husband's whereabouts. Once this happened, they even set up a police camp in my house. Nothing was possible now—the police had begun to watch the village.

Well this was how I came into the movement. Kadiyala Gopal Rao and Chandra Rajeshwar Rao were responsible for my progress and they taught me all this. Although we had a Mahila Sangham, it was Rajeshwar Rao who taught us everything and guided our activity.

In those days even our boxes were checked and our clothes were counted. This happened only to the fulltime workers, not the ordinary members. The system was that the organizers should not have more than six saris each. As we were moving among the people, we should be of the people, not be extravagant or different. Our dress and language should mingle with theirs and we should not be fashionable. It would be difficult to communicate if we were not with them. So this was part of what we were taught in our lessons, to dress and speak so as to mingle with the people.

I sold the silk saris I was given for my wedding and bought ordinary saris for others with the money. I have never really liked wearing silk. Even though we were just fifteen or sixteen years old we never even wore flowers in our hair. We were to be as simple as possible. If we wore flowers and went to meetings people may say we are fashionable like prostitutes. For instance, one day Hanumayamma and I wore dangling earrings and went to a village. Some people there liked Hanumayamma's earrings and sent a goldsmith to our village to get a model. Then some of our district leaders were staying underground in our village. They came to know about the earrings. We got a long letter from the District Secretary. I received that letter. It was very long, but now I recollect only two or three sentences. 'Are you going to the villages to spread fashion or important information? Puncturing your bodies to wear such earrings . . . is it civilized?'—this and that: it went on

and on. I showed the letter to Hanumayamma. I was very upset then. From the next day onwards we removed our earrings. To this day we do not wear such things. The Party interfered with this personal issue because it believed that when we worked with people we ought to serve as examples—or else there is a possibility that we would distract people. The people in the Party, the important ones, had to comply with these requirements. The ordinary members of the People's Sanghams were left to do what they pleased. The action that could be taken on each one of us depended on our rank. We used to travel all over Krishna Jilla working, fifteen of us. We had no experience after all, so we used to travel in twos. When we went to the village and held a meeting, we'd decide in advance who was to speak. Later we would discuss the speech and check, 'What did I say? Was it all right? What was wrong with your speech? etc.' Later we would also ask the local comrades for their opinions. The next day we would gather information about how the people in the village had reacted to our speech. How did the men take it? What were the women thinking? What was the opinion among the people? So this experience would be useful when we went to the next village. In the nights we held public meetings. The whole day we would go around enrolling members for the Mahila Sangham. The membership was one anna (six paise). Her name, her husband or father's name, village, jilla, taluka, we would write it down, take the anna and give her a receipt. The form said that this Sangham works for social, economic and political issues. We are becoming members and accept these aims. The Mahila Sangham flag had the words Freedom, Peace, Progress (*abhyudaya*), written on it. After enrolling members we would pick up our bags and go on to the next village. There were no buses in those days. We were on tour for fifteen to twenty days. When we got back, we would rest for a day and write a report for the Party. After reading the report, the Party would make any suggestions that were necessary. There was a conference every month. We had a Jilla Mahila Section and a Jilla Working Committee. There was also the section that was connected to the Party. We used to meet with them. For these meetings every month we were required to read some books. Even if we could not read because of all the travelling, we would sit all night before the meeting and complete the assignments. Or else we would feel that it went against our principles. This was part of our training. When

we went on tour, we were sent with the address and the name of the person we were to contact. Our comrades who were in that village would meet us first and then we would be introduced to the women there. They would also arrange for the public meetings there. Later they would come with us to enrol members. This was because people would not respond to strangers. But when the wives or sisters of comrades asked them, they would come. So we took the women we knew from the village. When we had to work with women in the villages we had to face some difficulties. In those days if women travelled from one village to another in a cart, we tied curtains to cover the front and back of the cart. My mother and aunt used to travel that way. Many women came into the movement through their family connections. Some came without family connections. For them it meant severing connections with their husbands. It meant coming away when their husbands did not agree with their views. There are instances like that.

Nagella Rajeshwaramma and Janakiramaiah were a couple. He was sympathetic to the Party but she was a good speaker and moved around the village and a good organizer. In those days women did not come out much. These old gossips [men] who sit on the doorstep would say, 'Look here!—What's all this? Your wife has gone far above you and has earned a name.' So there was trouble between them. It came to a separation and the point of divorce. Then she stayed home for a couple of years and did not go out to do any work. Later through their daughter Jyothi there was some understanding between them. He adjusted to her as they grew older. Now he is a sympathiser and gives good advice to the Party. Because she was active, the remarks of the people around did have an effect.

We had to face a lot of problems when we went to the villages. We walked on the streets with sling bags on our arms. The men sitting on their doorsteps would heckle us and mock at us. Even the women abused us to our faces. When we went to their houses and asked for the children they would say, abusively, 'like vagabond widows—isn't it enough that you are ruined? Have you come to ruin our children also?' And we would weep after we came out. In one place when they abused us foully, I burst out weeping right there, unable to control myself. Srikrishna, another organizer, was still fighting. There I was, weeping and she was fighting. We walked nearly four miles to get home. Rajeshwar Rao or someone

else was there. We told him that they had abused us like this and we would not go again and argued with him. First he laughed and let it pass. Later he explained the whole thing. He said that their condition was such and just illustrated the need for more work on our part. You must strengthen your determination and work harder. You shouldn't weep so easily. After all if they know all this where is the need for a Party? Where is the need for a secret existence for us? Since we know the circumstances, we should work harder and recognize the need and change the situation. And so we started going to the villages again. Once, in a village called Sanagapadu, we contacted a comrade and fixed a public meeting. We had a drummer announcing the meeting. When the meeting of the women's organization was announced some people began to come—mostly men. Sometimes they would be fifty-fifty—men and women. They did not come at the same time. So to keep the ones who came first from leaving we had to sing songs. Although we could not sing well and did not have good voices we learnt two songs and kept singing them over and over in each village.

'Won't women be free? Is there no freedom for the race of women?' was one of our songs. Another was, 'Mother, come and learn to read. How long will you languish in slavery like a tortoise in water, ignorant of all. Mother come and learn.'

We learnt women's songs. We put these new ideas into the traditional songs that women sing at weddings and feasts. Now he is not there, Mukkamala Nagabhushanam—he wrote many of the songs. He wrote 'Mangalam Veera Jhansi' and many other cradle songs and pounding songs. Some books of women's songs also came out. Koteswaramma and Tapi Rajamma used to sing very well.

When we went to the villages we said that women should have the right to marry if widowed and the right to divorce. We also spoke of women's right to property. Then we spoke of delivery, health care and better child birth facilities for women. When we had conferences we had exhibitions for healthy children and awarded prizes for the best. We spoke of nutritional food and said that salt and tamarind should be reduced. We spoke of how to cook and how to rear children. Not only did we make public statements, we tried to practise this in the Party families as well. We ate the vegetables without peeling them, so that others would also follow our example.

In the beginning they used to say, 'what is it you are arguing for, after all? That women, instead of cooking for the men, should be loafing around in the bazaars and that widowed women should go and get married. Isn't that all?' So we didn't force our views on them. If a woman didn't want to remarry—we didn't believe in forcing her. If she was very young and wanted to marry, and society wouldn't agree, then a lot of atrocities took place. Infanticides, suicides, and abortions were the result. Earlier the custom of *sati* was there, when women were put to death forcibly on the husband's pyre. Raja Rammohan Roy opposed this and brought so many changes. Society has changed. Will we agree today if women are put to death with their husbands? How much trouble he had to face just to change this. Today none of us will say that *sati* is a good custom. Society keeps changing. We should take what is good in the beliefs of our elders and reject what is bad—we used to tell them all this. We also worked on property rights and divorce laws. Now if a woman did not have property rights there were problems of dowry, leading to women dying and families being destroyed. If women inherited property as a birth-right with the men, then they need not depend on the mercy of the man in the family. The Central Government set up a Committee headed by B. N. Rao. They recommended that if the husband died, the wife should have a life interest in his property as well as an equal right in her parent's property. Saying this we collected nearly 40–50,000 signatures on a campaign. These signatures were given to B. N. Rao when he came to Vijayawada. This was discussed in Parliament also. Then the Hindu Code Bill was brought forth. We even brought out a book on the Hindu Code Bill. There were changes in the property rights as a result of our struggle.

We also demanded a hospital for every four villages. A trained nurse for every village was yet another demand that we raised. We also raised a demand for lavatories in each village. We took up a signature campaign on all this. Because we had to set the ideal—we had land in Nandamur—we set 30 cents of land aside for lavatories for women. We collected donations from other villages to build lavatories there. We took up not only social issues and problems but also political issues. During World War II we said that the British Government should go. We were preparing women politically as well.

On April 2, 1942 the Mahila Sangham Conference was taking

place. A couple came saying that they wanted widow remarriage (she was a widow). So we married them in the afternoon during the conference. This took place in the Ashram. Then the orthodox Hindus said that the Ashram was polluted, brought some rowdies and attacked the Ashram. There was no electricity. We had put up tents and were managing with petromax lamps. Nearly 1200 to 1300 women were there—children and women. The guards from the youth and peasant Sanghams were there when the rowdies threw stones and disturbed the meeting. They were hurt badly. Later these youths went, caught the rowdies and beat them up. Finally we had to move all the 1300 women to the village with the help of the petromax lamps as it was no longer safe in the Ashram. Then we cleaned a large cattle shed in the village, finished the meeting there the next day and then sent them back to their villages. Later there were rumours that women were attacked, beaten up, etc. They also added that they did this and that and created terrible rumours. And we had to go around countering the rumours again. . .

In 1942 when we held political classes about 40 people came from all over the jilla. Historical materialism, politics, geography, the origin of man, a class on socialism, a class on women's issues, a class for songs etc. This is how women were trained as organizers.

In 1943, we took a house on rent, and ran about four or five classes with fifty people in each class. Each course was for a month, it was during World War II, so they also taught self defence. We wore shirts and shorts, somewhat like knickers, and marched in the old Mahila Mandali Clubs. Rajeshwar Rao used to conduct the drills. People came from all over the State. All women. Then Swarajyam came to the first class with me. Swarajyam was thirteen then. We used to stuff gunny bags, hang them up and practise on them. Once Rajeshwar Rao was standing there and teaching us. My hand hit him accidentally. It took him nearly ten minutes to recover! Our classes were like that. They taught us to make sacrifices. All of us were asked to give up our property and we did. If they had a wife or parent, they would give them their share, and the remaining share would be given to the Party. We didn't have any children. I wanted to give my share, but the Party did not agree. In 1943, January, they called for Lenin Day and discussed whether women's property should be taken or not. Even then I was the only one who came forward to give my property. They felt that

taking women's property would cause problems. Suppose the Party was not in a condition to support them, then how would the women survive? So they decided not to take the property of women. After 20 days, however, they agreed to take my property. Then we gave my mother-in-law her share and sold our share and gave it to the Party. The Party used to give us Rs 20 a month. We used to stay in the office—so we paid Rs 5 as rent and we paid Rs 13 a month for the commune meals which cost a half-rupee each. Because Manikonda Subba Rao lived in the office, his bill used to come to Rs 13. But I used to move around the villages so it never came to Rs 13 for me. After the rent and food was paid for—and the travel—we would use the remaining two or three rupees for clothes, and give back whatever surplus we had to the Party. We never wasted the money on unnecessary things. There was a lot of difference between the lives of the full-timers and the others. From eating, dressing, other habits and expenses, there was a uniformity about our habits. So the people also spoke of us like that. We had Gandhian marriages, no mantras, no *mangalasutras*, only an exchange of garlands and a speech by some comrades. Some began to wear *mangalasutras* later. But we did not do so. So although marriage took place it was as if there were no marriages—even that became an issue sometimes.

We did not take dowry. If they were near and shared our social convictions, they just married without these dowries. Even the Congressmen were ready to give their girls to the young men from the Party, because they felt they were intelligent, had no bad habits, would not beat their wives and would look after them well. There was the opinion that drunkards and lechers would be expelled from the Party. If any wife beating took place, it was reported to the Party, an enquiry held and action taken. They were not given any position in the Party.

Now Shastri is in the CPI. When his father died, his relatives insisted that he perform the last rites. Shastri was the eldest son. He was forced to perform the rituals. Since he did not get his head shaved—no one would have known unless they were told. But he admitted that he had succumbed to pressure. He said he had committed an error and asked the Party to take action against him. He was suspended for three months. So in ethical matters if anyone criticised us, even our enemies, the Congress would defend us!

By now the struggle had spread to all the jillas. Later in Guntur,

West Godavari, Visakhapatnam, Kurnool, Cuddapah, Chittoor, Mahila Sanghams were started.

There was a stage when, fearing that if they stayed back the children would be dumped on them, the old women would rush first to the meetings. Often, knowing that there would be repression, that they would be beaten, they used to give shelter to comrades. If knowing all this they could do so much, was it not a result of the women having a raised consciousness? There was also the hope that socialism would come fairly soon. We told everyone that socialism would come. So there was the feeling that even if we suffered now, we could take care of the suffering after socialism came. Then in West Godavari, there was a purdah system. Only in the comrade's houses would the doors be opened. The houses did not even have windows—and there were joint families. Either the father or the eldest son ruled the family. If women had to be taken out, even to visit their mother's houses, it was these elders who decided. We used to go and collect the women who huddled in the dark corners of these rooms and take them by hand to a part of the house where we would hold a gathering. In the end comrades were told that they should take their wives at least to films. Even to the cinema they would go in the night after everyone had gone to bed, and return quietly without their knowledge. Slowly, we held meetings for them. This was not possible in their houses. In their mother's houses they would come easily with their brothers or if the husband was there, with him. From the mother-in-law's house they would only come out secretly. They used to be given books, magazines and meetings were held for them. We also held night schools and taught the adults to read and write.

We conducted Veereshalingam's anniversary. We sent a circular and the programme was carried on in nearly forty villages without our presence. The Village Committees, the Taluka Sanghams and the Jilla Sanghams were all functioning then. This raised women's consciousness a little. Superstitions and blind faith were a little more difficult to tackle. There was Tapi Rajamma—a Brahmin—but she was very dark. In one house they called me in and asked where she should be fed. When we said they were Brahmins, she was also invited inside and asked to eat. In some comrade's houses we managed to convince them that all should eat together.

In 1945, the All India Kisan Maha Sabha was held, wasn't it? All the women from the villages brought pots full of pickle, bags of

rice and came in carts with their children. There were volunteer squads also. There were two women's squads. T. Savithri [from Guntur, now living in Hyderabad] and I, were the commanders of the volunteer squads. There was also a parade of the squads. In 1947, during the time of the Prakasham Ordinance, the State Mahila Sangham Conference was held in Chennur in Guntur district. That had nothing to do with Telangana. Since there were Mahila Sanghams in all the districts we arranged a State Sangham. Later, under the Presidentship of Unnava Laxmi Bai, the All India Mahila Sabha was held in Kakinada. We enrolled members for that Sabha also. They said the membership was four annas. Since four annas was too high we enrolled them for an anna. (We enrolled a total 22,000 of our people.) About 2,000 we enrolled for the four-anna membership. But the total was 22,000. Later we went in large numbers to the Kakinada Sabha. They did not allow us to come there. We fought to be allowed. About 2,000 of us went. They refused to recognize us. There was such a commotion. Since we had enrolled poor people, they felt that with a one-anna membership all lowly poor peasants and labourers would be able to come into the conference. That is why they did not let us come. Parvathi was in the Guntur District Sangham. She tried a little to help us. But it was no use. Some of us wanted the State Mahila Sangham to be recognized as an affiliated or sister organization and got Dr Acchamamba to raise the question. They would not agree. They would neither give us affiliation nor recognize the State Mahila Sangham as a branch.

When we were in jail Dr Acchamamba gave an undertaking [to the Government dissociating herself from the movement and promising not to participate in such political activity in the future] pleading for her release. She herself did not really want to do it, but had to because her husband, Sastri, insisted. Poor thing, she was very upset about it. She wasn't relased immediately. She had to stay with us in prison for a week afterwards. How could we feel free with her after she had given such an undertaking? She must have felt very bad. After all, she did it only because her husband forced her to. She was caught between the two and it was a big mental strain for her. In 1947, during the Prakasam Ordinance, the State Mahila Sangham Conference took place. I don't remember whether Acchamamba was the President or whether was Laxmi of Visakhapatnam, but I was the Secretary. We were trying to arrange

a second conference in Vijayawada. Then we were bringing out the *Andhra Vanitha* magazine, and the third issue of *Prajashakti* was in the press, and repression increased. Then the magazine was stopped. At that time we were in Acchamamba's house. We took out a procession to demand that our magazine should not be closed down but given back to us. Then at the Governorpet Centre, near the Bridge, we were teargassed. My mother-in-law, Bullemma, and another older woman whose name I can't remember, were in the lead. As the teargas started, they didn't know what to do, our bodies were burning. We were scattered all over the place. Some of us went back to Acchamamba's place. Then the police came there and arrested nearly eighty of us and took them away. Finally they were taken to Nandigaon jail.

Dronavali Anasuya had just delivered Bharadwaj—he was sixteen days old. Some friends went to visit her with a gift of ripe mangoes. She handed over the baby to her visitors and came to join the procession. She was also arrested and put in Nandigaon Jail where she developed milk fever and had serious problems. On the third day, they kept sixteen of us and released the rest. They filed cases. The next time I went to court, I was arrested as a detenue. Acchamamba was arrested before that. Anasuya was arrested again and put in Eluru. She had two children. The girl was two and the boy was then six months. She fought to keep the children with her in jail and there was no one she could leave them with. There is no ration for children in jail. They fell very ill and had to be taken to Madras. When they came out, the boy was two years old. In 1948 there was a women's jail in Rayavellur. There was a woman called Vimala with us. Poor thing—she didn't know anything. She had helped some people who were underground. She became very firm in jail. There were two women from Tamil Nadu—Janaki and Mariamma. Later the Telugu women were shifted to Kurnool. They never allowed us any interviews. They never allowed anything to come from outside. We didn't know what to do. We used to draw patterns on the floor and make strings of flags that we could hang up. They would say we couldn't fly flags in jail. We would squat around the flag and say: 'This has to stay till the evening—you can remove it over our dead bodies otherwise.'

There was no news from outside. There was an order that we were to be kept in a lock-up. Some people escaped from Rajahmundry jail. We got instructions from outside to fight. So we

sat on chairs outside and refused to move. The matron, the superintendent—they all came. Janaki was the leader. They dragged us forcibly towards the lock-up. We were struggling and refusing to go. We were wearing seven-yard saris. Suddenly the matron pulled off the pleats of our saris. As there were men there, we had to go. We did not expect them to do such a thing.

After I went in, Anasuya refused to go in there. The matron pulled her sari and lifted up her skirt. Then Anasuya hit her—the matron—on her cheek. Then Vimala kicked the matron on her chest. The matron wanted to take revenge and made the rules stricter for us. We were checked every now and then. We were not allowed to talk to the other prisoners. She would blacken our papers with soot and so on. Even the books that the men got in jail, we were not given. Then we created a row saying we wanted to study. They said: 'you can't go to the jail school, but if you insist the teacher will come to your cell and teach you.' She set the CID to watch the Telugu teacher. On Monday, the Chief of the jail would come for checking and if we had any problems we could speak from our line-up and tell him. Once when I was telling him something, the matron intervened very rudely. Then Anne Anasuyamma (the writer Satyanarayana Reddy's sister) pulled off her slipper and hit the matron on her cheek. She went around for a week with a bandage. So although she hit her in front of everyone, since it was the matron's fault, even the superintendent did not say anything. After that her spite increased. Our letters were censored. So we wrote in a code that only our people could understand. Anasuya's husband used to be in Salem jail. Subba Rao was in the Kurnool jail. They used to send us books—because if they were censored once, the books were not censored again. So we would exchange letters that the jail authorities could not understand. We would report what happened here and follow their advice if they had any to give.

At the end of 1948, when the movement subsided, everyone was released. But I was not released. I was alone there, all alone, for six months. I was not allowed to talk to the other convicts. There were convicts there who had been inside for 20 years. Our block was separate from the block where the other convicts were kept. We were not allowed to go there. When we walked around the jail yard, or when they came to our cells to work, we would talk to them. The doctor was quite a decent fellow. We used to sit and talk

to him. In the end when I was alone, the other convicts used to come to the window of my cell and talk to me. They never said anything to me, but they would beat up those convicts later. So I used to say: 'why do you suffer because of me, don't come here.' But they would say that they were suffering anyway and that I was not to worry. They continued to come and talk to me.

In 1948, we went on a hunger strike once for 17 days and another time for 20 days. The first time for 17 days we were fasting for an improvement in jail conditions. The men used to drink lemon water it seems, we didn't know. When the doctor told us that, we didn't believe him, thinking he was fooling us. We just kept drinking plain water. Then Janaki started passing blood in her motions. But she didn't tell anyone. Because she had been in jail during the Congress movement and was older than us, she had more experience. We were seventeen or eighteen years younger than her. She knew that if she reported the blood in her motions, she would be shifted to hospital and we would be in trouble without her. So when they told us that our people had called off the hunger strike, we refused to believe them. We gave up only after we got letters from our own people. We were living on plain water for nearly seventeen days. Annumalla Seetharama Rao and another man died in jail, then we fasted again for twenty days.

After all were released, six months later, they released me because my mother-in-law was very ill, but they did not give me permission to go home. I had to stay in Madras. So I stayed in Madras for four or five months.

My mother-in-law, Bullemma, was known as Gorky's Mother in the Party. She lost her husband when she was young. There was an Ashram in Nandamur, my mother-in-law used to go to that Ashram to perform fasts and rituals. Every Monday she used to do them and get others to do them. So she had a lot of authority in her village. Everyone called her for everything. My mother-in-law had a child and had lost her husband by the time she was fifteen. In those days widows were not permitted to wear blouses. She believed that my husband's father and uncle both died because they were educated. Since my husband was Bullemma's only son she did not want to risk his life and did not let him go to school. When he saw his maternal uncle studying, he wanted to study. He began to weep and his mother began to weep and finally they called a teacher to the village and collected ten boys to study under him, privately.

Later Bullemma took four of the boys who studied with him, kept them in Bandar, cooked and fed all of them, while they studied there with her son. Later she liked the idea and educated many boys that way. When she wore blouses and went into the town, everyone gossiped about her. She did not care about them and continued to wear blouses. So slowly some changes, some independent ideas, began to show up.

In Madras when Subba Rao was studying for the veterinary course, Andhra-Tamil feelings were so strong that he was made to fail in the exams. So he went into shock and began to shout and scream; he was sent home by the students. He refused to study after that. He worked as a teacher and then came into the movement. So we had some sort of a relationship in the movement even before we were married. I also knew my mother-in-law before I married. She used to be the Commune Manager and cook for everyone. There were 70–80 people there while the Telangana struggle was on. So some of them would also come and stay here. Some days it would increase by 20 or 25 people. There was attendance taken when everyone came in the morning to drink a cup of milk. On that count, food would be cooked for the afternoon meal. Then those who ate in the afternoon would give their names for the night meal and then go. So the night meal would be prepared. Bullemma did all this—alone. There was one cook. But if he didn't work properly, she would ask him to step out and finish the cooking all alone. Some of them would come back after films. There were nearly seventy people there, but she would rise for each one, open the door, serve their meals and put away everything and then go to bed. She had to rise again early in the morning. So the comrades would say to her: 'Mother, your health will suffer. Don't wake up to serve those who go for films and come late,' but she would say: 'how can that be?' and continue to do so. She looked after each one like her own child. When we were all in jail, and one by one they were shooting down the ones outside, she fell ill, and all alone she would rave, calling out each comrade by name and saying have you come? . . . have you come my son! She was firm during repression, she was even beaten. In 1949, when she was ill, she was released on parole and had to stay in Madras because she had no permission to go home.

After the Union Armies came, they set up concentration camps here. Atluri Satyavathi—the Kaikaluru Mahila Sangham

Secretary—her house was raided. Her husband Chalapathi Rao was not there when this happened. As soon as the police came she ran out. The police forced her to come into the house, but she refused, saying that no matter what they did, she would never enter the house. The neighbours came to her support. Then, unable to do anything, the police left. Sometime then, when I went to meet the people who were released, we were arrested again—Subba Rao and I. We were beaten up then. After they knew who we were they put us in the Fort in Bandar, the torture chamber! I was about 13 or 14 years old then. I was taken by Gopal Rao's wife. They said we will take care of you later. Then I was sent to Rayavellore jail. In 1943, we dug the Krishna Jilla canal—some thousands of volunteers. I sent up a petition on behalf of the Rythu (peasant) Sangham. We took out a huge procession and then held a demonstration. After it all failed, we decided to dig the canal. Sundarayya, Rajeshwar Rao, Chandram, I and a lot of women bore baskets of earth on our heads. Huge baskets. They would carry buttermilk in huge pots and pour it into our cupped hands. We would drink and then go on working. Some were digging, others carrying the earth. In fifteen days we dug such a huge canal. Because we were communists we could do it. Others would not have been able to, they said. The Government also respected the demands we took on behalf of the Rythu Sangham. We did not beg for favours from MLAs and MLCs as we do today. . .

Regalla Acchamamba

My name is Susheela. Our family name is Regalla. Our village is called Gollacherla and is in Manukota Taluka. My father's name is Jagga Reddy. We were poor folk. We had a little land and lived by farming it. My father could not read or write. My brother was young. We were five girls and three boys—a large family. We worked very hard. My father felt that everyone was educated and his sons should also study. He brought a *sathani* teacher and gave him a part of the house to live in. We all worked with my father in the fields till dark.

Then the struggle against the Nizam Nawab started. Many women came into the struggle happily, singing the songs that had been written. There was so much excitement. Well, that is how I joined the movement. I was fourteen years old then; I too was caught up in the excitement.

In the evening I used to join the others and study with them, no matter how tired I was. This way I studied up to the third class. My father never knew that I was studying. When I was about ten years old I was married. Afterwards he (my husband) and I both came into the movement. Soon after he was arrested and I was alone. What was I to do? Chirravuri Laxminarasayya from Khammam and Thigala Satyanarayana of Manakota were there with us at that time. They said that I had no reason to worry as long as they were there. I was comforted and continued with their help. For a long time I waited for my husband to come back. I thought he would come soon—but he did not.

There were eight or nine women who came in with me into the movement. But they left midway. Some were arrested, some were killed and some simply dropped out. One woman was killed in jail—Buchamma. She came from Pindiprolu, Khammam Taluka. She kept protesting and struggling even in jail. They knew she was dangerous and they just killed her. I do not know how . . . we

were in the forest then, we just heard that she had been caught and then killed.

Soon after this we were trained to use guns. Then a doctor came and trained us. His name was Ramdas, I think. In that training camp, Swarajyam, Lalitha and Laxmi were also there with me. We were taught to clean and bandage wounds, and give injections. I was given a doctor's responsibility. We were all given different responsibilities. One was sent to the Area Committee, another as an ordinary member, yet another was a Joint Secretary and so on. During the movement my job was dressing wounds, giving injections and medicines. I had no weapons. I was given two couriers who went with me wherever I went. After I had cleaned wounds, bandaged them and given the needed injections, the couriers would bring me back to the central committee. It would have been very dangerous for them if I had been caught. Also after all, my experience, my ability, and my patience made me very valuable to them. Where else could they get someone like this? So they always sent two men to escort me.

We lived in the squad. There were so many men there! We were all living together. The conditions . . . do you know what it was like? One could not tell who could be trusted or whose attitude would suddenly change. I used to do a lot of work there. I used to wash clothes, make *rotis*, prepare different kinds of food for different people. Rice for some, *roti* for some, *upma* for some. Suddenly one them would say, 'why not *rotis* for me? Why only rice?' The trouble usually started like this. How could I cater to everybody's needs—tell me? I tried to provide the kinds of food that each one really needed. How could I manage when they began to fight over food like this? There was such bickering over food! I got out of that fix somehow. What a story that was!

Mohan Rao was the leader of the squad. There was such a rumpus in the squad at that time. Then we took a decision that hereafter we would just keep quiet about gossip and not carry tales. Or else it would go from one person to another and become a mountain. It would all come out anyway sometime—so we just kept our mouths shut. Swarajyam was an area committee member then. She started a story about me. They said I was having an affair with one of the men. I said that it was not true. I said that I was prepared to lose my life but I was not that kind of woman. But they said I was guilty. I said I would stand there and they could shoot me

down if they wanted to. I asked them to prove it—to ask the man to prove it. I was not scared of dying. If I was I would not have come into the movement, would I? They sent me off to another squad to test me. I used to go wherever I was sent. I used to travel from squad to squad to give cholera and malaria injections. I kept doing my work. They kept insisting that I should admit that I had done something wrong. I would not confess to something I had simply not done. I remember a Brahmin comrade, Tirumala Rao, saying that the Reddy caste was a *badmash* caste and we would never admit our mistakes. I felt that I would die rather than say that I had done something of which I was completely innocent. He threatened to remove me from the Party membership. He was in the Area Committee and so was Swarajyam. They simply expelled me. My name then was Acchamamba. They then issued a pamphlet saying that I was expelled and so on. I was being sent out and blamed for something I had not done. I felt the truth would be known sometime. My bag and clothes were checked. I was also stripped and checked. Swarajyam did it. She wrote something on a piece of paper. I picked up the paper and she had written there that I was expelled from the Party. She came and snatched the paper away from me brusquely. So I thought if that was the way it is—all right. I left and as I went part of the way, it rained heavily and we had to cross a swollen stream. After we crossed this they took me to another centre and said they would move me in a day or two. Subba Rao—Swarajyam's husband—was also at the same centre. He had also been expelled from the Party! 'Sister! what is the matter?' he asked me. I told him what had happened to me . . . my whole story . . . he asked where I would go, and what I would do now. How would I live? I said I would manage somehow. He then gave me a hundred rupees and asked me to keep it for my train or bus fare to go wherever I wanted to. I did not have a paisa with me then. The Party people did not even think of giving me the money I needed to go home! After all the work I had done for them, bandaging and nursing so many—no thought at all. I was there for a week. Then Chirravuri Laxminarasayya came there. He asked me how I happened to be there and why I had come. I told him that I wanted to talk to him and asked him to step aside. I then told him the whole story . . . told him how I was sent out! He asked how I could have left like that, I said that I had no choice . . . it was the Party . . . I had to go when I was asked to. If I stayed

against their orders—more accusations could have come against me! So I did not want to stay. He said he would find out what the problem was. He then wrote to the Area Committee saying that it was like losing a milch buffalo to send me out. Who would do all the dressing and medication? Where would they get someone to replace me? Why didn't they set a watch on me rather than expel me and so on. He added that I did not seem like that kind of woman. Where would they get someone like me in this lifetime? He said he would discuss the matter further when he got there, but that I should be taken back urgently. Then they came and took me back! After about fifteen days or a month they even restored my Party membership.

Around that time they asked me to go to a squad to give an injection. Now will all the men in the squad behave alike? There was one son of a bitch there who had claimed that he was accustomed to me. How could I say, 'you son of a bitch—when have I ever seen your face?' The others believed his story. I kept saying that it was not true, but they believed him, not me. So when I was asked to go to that squad again, to give an injection I flatly refused. I said I would not go, not for anything in the world. After all anything can happen . . . Mohan Rao kept pleading with me—he said I was brave, I was the Rani of Jhansi and I must prove my mettle! I must go to that squad. I was stubborn. I said, no, I did not want any greatness. I would not go. Then finally he said, 'leave her alone if she does not want to go—why force her?' and they let me be. . .

After some days we took another path. We moved to Timmapuram in Narasampet Taluka. The struggle there and in Allinagar was very intense. Once when we were all sleeping in the forest, we were encircled. This was in the night. We could not move in any direction. There were two other squads with us. They could have easily killed us but they did not. They separated into two groups and we managed to escape through the gap between them. Not one of us was killed. We all got away.

Another time we had all got together. We had a meeting to decide how the squads should split—which direction each one would take. Mohan Rao was running a high fever. It was very difficult looking after him and attending the meeting. Anyway I left him in one spot and sat in the meeting. We sent a courier into the village. He was to find out what the news in the village was,

and come and report to us. This fellow went straight to the police. How were we to know this? We did not even set a sentry because we had sent this man. He brought the police directly to the spot where we were. We were stunned. We just sat like that. We all had our weapons with us. Not a sound from anyone. It was such chaos . . . the man we had sent came running and jumped amidst us. Actually since we were separating we had slaughtered a small goat and we were having a feast of sorts! After all we did not know who would live and who would die or when we would meet again. So we cooked a grand meal. The food was cooking just a short distance away from where we were sitting. We always cooked the food at a distance from where we sat. I had gone across to the pot to take it down from the fire when this fellow arrived. He pointed a gun at me. The bullet just whizzed past me. See this ear? I still cannot hear in this ear. A little closer and I would have been dead. . . we were all scattered. I ran some distance and that fellow followed me. I was wearing a green sari. He was hardly twenty yards away. I was running but he did not shoot. He wanted to catch me. I was determined not to be caught. I thought it was better to die. I kept running and he kept running after me. After some distance he gave up hope and joined the group of policemen.

I wondered what happened to Mohan Rao and when I turned I saw him coming up from the other side. I turned to him, picked him up like a sack, swung him on to my shoulder and carried him along. Then we came to a big hill. He was very feverish, though he had no wounds. So I set him down near the hill and asked him to rest awhile. He was thirsty and wanted some water. Now where could I get water? I let him sit awhile and slowly took him up the hill. This brought us to the path taken by the police. There was a man, one of our men, lying there groaning. He had a bullet in his stomach. We were both frightened at first thinking that the police were taking him along. So both of us hid in the grass that was there. We were covered completely. We were there for an hour or more. It was about 8.00 in the evening. The attack took place at four. We sat near a tree. Mohan Rao's fever went up. There was no water. There were many tigers and bears there. You could hear them growl. They had moved this way because of the shots on the other side. We were scared they would attack us. We had no weapons. We had only the clothes we were wearing. Nothing else. He had one bag which had all his notes. My bag, heavy with

medicines, had fallen off somewhere. My sari was torn to shreds. Then I climbed a tree and plucked a few gooseberries. I powdered them on a stone and fed him—just like a bird feeding its young. I don't know how I did it! It was just the magic of that time. In the morning we wondered which way to go. Then we drew a map. To go left would mean to get back to the place where we were attacked. So we travelled in the opposite direction. After some time we heard a noise. I asked him to stay behind and I travelled a few yards—just about eight or nine yards in front. Even if one of us was killed then the other would survive. After we went some way we found the man who was shot in the stomach hiding in the bush. Just before this the police had returned to check how many were dead. They collected some wood and set fire to one dead man there—his watch was still there—just like that. This man who was wounded had just kept still—so that they would not find him. A little later some of our men came back to check and he called out to them. They made a hammock out of a *dhoti* and carried him along. Just then Mohan Rao and I came along. Since Mohan Rao was wearing khaki—they thought that it was the police and dropped the wounded man and ran away as fast as their legs would carry them. So I climbed a tree as quickly as I could and called out to them not to go—saying I was all alone there. Then they stopped, and I went to them, told them what had happened and brought them all back to Mohan Rao. The wounded man's stomach had begun to swell up. He was weeping. There were no medicines. I carried him on my shoulder and said let's go. He wanted water. He could not breathe. I sent them to fetch him some water. They brought a little water in a coconut shell. As they were giving him the water he died. I did not realize this. I kept carrying him and calling out that he was getting heavier. So then Mohan Rao checked his pulse and asked me to put him down. We just left him there and went on. That's all we could do—leave the dead on the wayside and carry on. We collected a few bits of wood and burnt him there. We were five of us now. It was all shrubs and tall grass, full of thorns. The thorns tore at my thighs. They were raw and bleeding. Even my sari got soaked with blood. I could not walk. Mohan Rao was feverish. He said, 'leave me behind and carry on.' But I said, 'how can we? We can leave a dead man—how can we leave a live one? What sin is this? Never mind, we will go on like this, stopping under one tree today, another tomorrow.' After some time I stopped to pull out all the

thorns. My sari was torn to shreds and I had knotted it together. No thread even to keep it together. I was in that sari for a month and fifteen days. And when I had my periods, only Brahma knows my trouble! I used to beg the shepherd boys to give me a piece of cloth. I would use it to knot my sari together or throw it over my shoulder and cover my shame thus! The days passed like this. We had not yet found the Party people. We were still searching for each other. Finally after a month we got to the Area Committee. We met them through the *koyas* with whom we were in touch. We went near the grain threshing stones outside a village. There was an old woman there. She was frightened when she saw strangers coming. I went to her and said—'don't be afraid—I am Errakka. [a female folk deity—literally, red sister] We are very hungry—can you give us some rice?' 'Where can I get rice?' she said. Then she said, 'wait here—I will get some.' So I said, 'no—the police may come here. I will be under such a tree in the wood. You come there.' Poor thing—that old woman came there with a basket full of rice. I do not know how she brought it secretly. Now how to eat it? She brought just a little chilli powder to eat it with. We had not eaten for fifteen days. Anyway we ate that rice, each of us a little. Immediately our stomachs started aching. We drank a little water and as we sat still for some time the pain slowly went down. As it grew dark we said we would go. The old woman started crying saying, 'my child—why do you have to suffer like this.' By the next afternoon we reached the Committee. We asked them what to do. Our Committee was then re-made and we moved on to another area. We went towards Tekulagudem and Miryalgudem.

There all the people around called me 'Errakka, Errakka.' That is because I used to give them medicine. The *koyas* used to get big sores, horrible ones. I gave them medicines and cured them. Penicillin injections were so good. That, and some ointment, and keeping the sores clean would often do the trick. So they really cared for me. They were so happy if I went to their houses. Once they came and called me to the village to deliver a child. My people would not send me. I wanted to go. After all we should help someone in danger. Anyway we are all going to die some day. The woman had been suffering for a day. So I went. She had been in labour for three whole days. I gave her an injection (which the doctor had told me about) and bathed her. She delivered within two hours. You should have seen their happiness. They would not

let me move. They wanted to give me a bath, wash my clothes, boil milk for me. They asked me not to go; they wanted to bring a chicken, and cook it—and all sorts of things! By then people from my squad had come along to see where I had gone. After all if I was lost, what would they do? So, on the one hand they said, 'come back,' and on the other these people said, 'no she can't go.' So they said, 'by day break the police will come and take her away.' Finally they agreed. Then they cooked, fed us and about ten of them came along to escort me back to the squad.

I stayed in a *koya* house in Miryalagudem. These *koyas* hid me, and gave me shelter. Then the police came to their house. They used to weave baskets and trays and keep them in a hollow. They hid me in that hollow and threw baskets over me! The police searched the whole house but could not find me. They left after searching for some time. Then these people took me to another village. The police came there as well. Now what was I to do? Even if I dressed like a *koya* I would not pass for one. How could I hide? They used to have big holes in the ground to store paddy. They hid me in one of these holes—it was big enough to hold a human being. Then they covered the hole with the large trays that they use to dry grain. So, that day it happened like that. Later they hanged four men in that village, and shot them dead because they suspected them of sheltering me. Now what was I to do? 'Errakka you had better go now—you cannot stay here alive,' they said and took me far away. I then came to Rajolu in Manukota Taluka. Then I reached Kesamudram and from there I went on to Nagaram. It meant walking the whole night. Even there the police came and created trouble. The people were scared. So I told them not to be scared and promised I would go away. But they ran away even before I could go. The village was swarming with police. I could not go anyway! There was a cattle shed somewhere on the outskirts. Not knowing what to do I climbed on to that shed where they stored the sheaves of grain. I sat there. They set fire to the whole village. I thought that if I burned to death—well that is it! Things were burning on all sides. In this condition I saw a cobra moving out in the shed. I could not move this way or that—there was no one in the village. If I moved, the snake might attack me—so I sat still. It just went round a few times and then went away. It was dark now and all the people came back. The farm workers came and started pulling at the straw and I was sitting

there like a devil. I greeted Venkatayya, who said, 'Oh, mud in your mouth, Errakka! So you are here—come get down.' And I got down. I left the village and joined the squad.

Another time when we were all in the forest together, we wanted to cook a meal. Three men went off to the store dump to get some rice for us to cook. Somewhere near the dump a tiger had littered. Three cubs. It leapt up at them. So they threw a towel at the tiger; it ran some way in another direction and then returned towards us. We were three women—so we scrambled up a tree as fast as we could. Then the men came and the tiger turned to them. They stood still and the tiger went away. We then thought it was no use staying there and packed up and moved. There was a police camp nearby. So without cooking or eating we left. We used to cover our tracks by walking in different directions, scattering like cattle. The police had tracked us till the spot where the tiger lay. Anyway we had moved on. We cooked and ate in another spot, rested and moved in the morning.

Once I had gone to deliver a child. I was there for two days. While I was away Thigala Satyanarayan Rao explained my whole story to Mohan Rao. He spoke about why I had been expelled from the Party. He told him that I was not that kind of woman, that I was very straight, but very stubborn. Then Thigala Satyanarayana Rao spoke to me and advised me to marry. He said I should marry someone. It was better that way. So I agreed. After all they would only advise me for my own good. Till then the idea had not occurred to me. I thought I would just stay like that—single. Then they said, 'why not marry this man Mohan Rao?' and I agreed. So we were married there. Much later when my first husband, Seshayya, was released, he came with my father to take me back. But I felt that to go back would be to make another mistake so I refused to go. He went away and I stayed on with Mohan Rao. Seshayya married again later and had two children.

I used to do the cooking. I cooked for all the people who were there in the squad. Sometimes if we did not get any food do you know what we did? We would collect some corn cobs, pop the corn, take a handful each, and eat it. We managed like that for some time. Once we had no food to eat. There was nobody in the villages to ask for food. It was all deserted. We collected some raw paddy from the fields. Then we kept blowing on it to separate the chaff. In this way we got a handful of rice. We cooked it and ate a

little each. It was as if we had come to life. Then there are some roots (*alligaddalu*) that grow in the water. We would go to the lake to collect them. As we bent over to collect them, a tiger came growling to drink at the pool. All of us ran away and hid in the bush. The tiger went away after drinking. Now we had the roots, but no pots to cook them! We would collect broken pots from the deserted huts and use them to cook in. Once we got some roots—like white yams; chickens eat a lot of them. The *koyas* used to cut them in big chunks, leave them in a basket in running water and then cook them. It was a kind of porridge. Sometimes there would even be little insects with tails in the gruel. Now we were hungry and we could not throw it away; if we did, who would feed us again? So we would just eat it somehow. They used to cook it once in eight days. They have changed their habits now, after we went there. They used to eat beef, mountain goats, pigs and lizards. They used to eat grains like *korralu, somalu* and *sajjalu* but not much wheat or rice. There used to be some wild fruit there called *pariki pandlu*—cactus-like. We used to eat this sometimes. But sometimes we simply could not bear the hunger. Sometimes we used to eat berries like *tuniki, bettaregi* and *kondamamidi*. Sometimes we even ate the *tumidiki* fruits. We used to have a small measure, a cup full of rice, for each person. If anyone came from afar then we would give them a little more. I used to cook for the squads and I was always kept to serve food because I would distribute it equally. Sometimes I would ask them to serve themselves so that there would be no complaint later. But they would say—no, you serve. We used to have a lot of meat but little rice. Sometimes we would cook some greens—yam or *doggari* leaves. The meat was from mountain goats, deer, buffalo, or wild pigs. Mohan Rao was a vegetarian. He could not eat the meat. They forced him to eat it once but he started vomiting. The others used to say—why did you come then into the Party? He used to just eat what little rice he was given. Later he slowly got accustomed to eating eggs and chicken. But it took him a long time to go near any meat. He would refuse the pieces and try to eat the gravy. I did not know him very well then. He had just been there fifteen days. He could not even stick a few leaves together to make himself a leaf plate. Then wondering what would happen to him at this rate I began to give him my portion of rice. The others got a bit suspicious of this. But I had no idea then. We were all young people there—no older ones.

Once a man was wounded on the head by a tiger. We were all lying down beside each other. We were scared. Some people snore in their sleep. It seems the tiger strikes when it hears a snore. This man was snoring loudly. So the tiger struck him. The claws had cut the scalp. They called out to me. I got his head shaved, cleaned the wound, gave an injection and dressed the wound. It healed well. Even after I came to Coonuru, I conducted a delivery. It was a landlord's daughter. The foetus was dead. I remembered the injection, sent for it, gave it to her and she delivered the dead baby. She was safe. They were very happy that I had saved their daughter. When I was with the *koyas*, I used to pick up all their children, ask about each one's health, go to their houses. They would say that their limbs were aching or say they had bodyache or a headache. I used to give each a tablet or two. They had a lot of affection for me. They would crowd around me if I entered their village calling out 'Errakka, Errakka.' We could not have survived without their protection. They were a very eager, happy people.

None of my brothers and sisters came into the movement. But my father was given a lot of trouble. He was arrested for a year because of me. My brother was beaten up. My mother was beaten. Our house looted and everyone in the house harrassed so that they could discover my whereabouts. But they did not know where I was or how I moved around. How did I come into it all? Well, first a man called Seshagiri Rao, who worked in the Kothagudem coal mines, came to me. He was underground. I knew him quite well. He asked me to carry some money to Ravi Narayan Reddy who was also underground in Vijayawada. I was frightened at first. But he taught me to sew the money into a cloth belt which I bound around my waist. Then I wore my sari and skirt over it and set forth. My brother who was twenty years old came with me but no one objected. No one knew that I was carrying the money. They thought I was going on some Party matter. We reached Vijayawada in the evening at 7.00. We found where Praja Shakti Nagar was and took a rickshaw to the address. Sita Devi, Narayan Reddy's wife was there. She was very pleasant. When I said I had come for Narayan Reddy, she served us the evening meal and asked us to stay the night and leave the next day. I did not tell her about the money. In the morning, after washing my face, I asked for Reddy garu, saying I had to talk to him. I said I had urgent work with him. She laughed at me saying, 'you are a slip of a girl, what work

can you have with him?' She asked me to bathe and change. I was in a fix because of the money. So I said I had no clothes. She offered me her sari, I just refused. So we set out. We got there and they were in a meeting. He asked me who I was and what I had come for. I gave him the letter, explained, went into the room, untied the money and gave it to him. He asked me how I had carried so much money. So I said what does it matter? I brought it somehow. He laughed. And so that's how I came into this work. There was one Rama Rao, a doctor in Pedapally, he gave me the name Susheela. My name used to be Acchamma but the Party called me Acchamamba. This was after Dr Acchamamba who was there in the Party. I can give injections even today, in the veins, in the skin, in the muscle etc. I have forgotten the names of some of the injections—I do not know any English, only ordinary Telugu. The doctor used to write everything in Telugu, saying this medicine for this etc. I had a note book. It has gone now, gone with the squads! I do not know where . . . at least if I had it now it would be good. Now this family is an ocean. It is like a factory routine now. I have fallen into this now. There is a lot of difference between these days and those. What was there then? Like the proverb which says 'One is peace and two is comfort! Either we lived or else we died.' Now it's not like that. There are the children, the household, and the family. Now whether the son's foot hurts or the daughter's finger aches it is a problem. Then we were not worried even about losing our lives! Any time of the night we just set out and kept travelling. Two miles or three we kept walking till sunrise. I was never arrested. When I came out (after an underground existence) Kothapalli Gopal Rao asked me to address a public meeting. So that if anyone was going to arrest or identify me it would have to be then. Besides I had to be introduced to the people. No one caught me or asked me anything. Mohan Rao is in politics even now. But I was amidst a growing family and trapped completely. The household was not at all well off. We had nothing—not even pots or pans. It was a hard time. If all of us were to enter politics, what would happen to the family? Two years after coming here my son was born. My old mother-in-law was there. I was left clinging to the house. Then after nine years, a daughter, then a son and another daughter. Then my mother-in-law had a paralytic stroke and died. And there is no leisure to think about politics. Not any longer, I look after the farm as well. . .

Jamalunnisa Baji and Razia Begum

BAJI: We were labelled kaffirs very early. In 1928 we were 12 or 13 years old. We bought *Nigar* and read it. It influenced all of us. The swadeshi movement also influenced us. I wore only swadeshi cloth. Hasrat Mohani—my father's cousin—was also a major influence. He stayed here during the war for some years near the Mosque in Mallapalli; he had a small house. His second wife was my father's niece. We did not in fact get a regular school education.

RAZIA: Our family was conservative. Only father was broad-minded. We lived in the village. When Baji married, we had a place in the city. We learnt Urdu and Persian. We did not know any English. We started a wall paper *Tameer*. It was all handwritten. We read and made others read. I began to learn English. I used two dictionaries, Urdu-English; English-Urdu. I read Shakespeare and Victor Hugo that way and felt happy when I understood it. Slowly I took to translation. I also read *Aiwan*, a magazine which used to come out at that time. I began to write short stories and published them later in the Osmania journal. I also wrote a novel where my brother-in-law and sister were the central characters. I do not know where it is now. I've lost it.

BAJI: A Brahmin boy used to come to teach Razia English. The family objected. Our relatives boycotted us. Very few girls were educated in those days. My mother always supported us. She was more like a friend than a mother.

RAZIA: My grandfather complimented my father on getting us educated. In Malakpet, we formed *Bazm-E-Ehbab*, a forum to fight purdah, in spite of opposition, many others joined us. Yunus Saleem, Muslim Ziai, writers and poets were invited there—Niaz,

Zakir Hussain, Saghir, Jigar, Ravish Siddiqui. Some of them stayed in our house. There were other literary activities as well. We did not read much of Marxist literature. But *Nigar* published some articles. There were many Urdu magazines. We also discussed political problems—the war, Germany, Hitler. We used to get hold of many books in Urdu and English and educate ourselves. Rabia and I did Inter Science and wanted to go for medicine. But we did B.A. and later M.A. We went to college in purdah, in a tonga or rickshaw. But during the war we stopped wearing purdah when we went out shopping.

Once we celebrated *Jashne-Mahtab*, gathering together on the night of *chaudvin ka chand**. Many women gathered including those from my sister-in-law's family. We wore white clothes. All the girls walked without purdah from Malakpet to Nampally. There was a poetry recitation as well. Our sister-in-law's father was Yahya Khan. He was in the excise department. He was quite liberal and permitted his children to go out. Most girls took off their veils while they were at college. We argued with them saying that they should remove them outside also. But they said as the people in the locality were not good, they had to observe purdah. Such were the discussions. Yes, I prayed from my seventh class. I learnt to recite the Quran. I kept the fasts and performed Namaz. When I came to college I slowly gave up everything—all these rituals. I felt God and rituals were different. That was the influence of the articles and the discussion in *Nigar*.

BAJI: At the *Id-ul-Milad* function, we used to tell our relatives and others that the real essence and content of religion did not lie in these rituals. We referred to *Seerat-un-Nabi* which had been written after the time of the Prophet and offered different interpretations.

Right from the beginning we were close to the left front. There was this Progressive Writers Association started in 1941. Makhdoom and Nazar Hyderabadi used to come regularly. We four sisters attended these meetings openly. Even mother came. Some used to sit behind *chilmans*. Even Tassaduq Panjethan who had returned from England did not attend the meetings openly. Many like Sajjad Zaheer and Omkar used to stay in our house for months when they were underground. After Independence, we attended

* The night before the full moon.

the Hindi Conference (Maulana's Asiatic Conference) in Lucknow. We hoisted red flags. Many were arrested. I became a member of the Party in 1946. I met Pramila Tai in the Party. We often talked about the 1942 Quit India movement. We did not work for it but had sympathies. There was more admiration for Nehru than for Gandhi. When Subhash Bose was removed we felt very annoyed and bad. But all the time we had a feeling that we were not doing anything. Right from the beginning we were with the nationalist movement. When we were at Ajanta, we learnt that Mohd. Ali and his wife were on a visit. We—Akhtar and my uncle as well—put our pocket money together: it was about 15 or 20 rupees and we gave it to Begum Mohd. Ali. After this visit he was elected President of the Congress. Begum Ali used to smoke and we were surprised to see that.

Once when Indonesia Day was observed in 1949, we held a meeting in the Victory playground. We organized a procession. A gang headed by Sanjiva Reddy attacked us. There was a rescue operation and we were all sent out by the back door.

My husband's family were very conservative. Initially it was difficult. I had to make many adjustments. My father is from Uttar Pradesh and mother from here. Father was a magistrate who served in all the regions of Hyderabad State. We did not observe purdah. My uncle, who worked with Hasrat Mohani, encouraged us. His wife did not observe purdah either. Hasrat's second wife was related to our uncle. I was not allowed to go back to my mother's house for a whole year. After that my father used to take me home. My husband's brother and his wife were very orthodox. No one was allowed to go out. For three years I was just a housewife—learnt some sewing etc. I felt tied down but did not hide the few ideas I had. I used to read books and somehow I adjusted to the family. Then we established our own separate house at Osmanpura, Kattalmandi. My son was three years old at the time. I started going to my father's house for holidays and my in-laws did not like it. Slowly my brothers and sisters began to visit me. We held literary meetings in the house. My husband was a quiet man and did not interfere. Although I did not go out, people who were underground, came and stayed here. I told him they were my brother's friends. Slowly he developed confidence, seeing that the whole family was involved. All my brothers left the colleges. They were involved in the movement and suffered a lot. Arms used to be

stored here. Anwar, Zafar and Hafiz—my cousins—were all in close contact. They were all arrested. Anwar was suffering from a serious ailment. Qamar and Mazhar who were underground were also arrested. Anwar's in-laws' house was in the wilderness—in Hubsiguda near Ramanthapur. Makhdoom and Omkar used to stay there. Makhdoom was also arrested along with Zafar, Shafeeq and Behzad. When Anwar was arrested, Akhtar (his sister-in-law, whose husband was in the police and leaked out the information) came running all the way with three children and informed us of the arrest. Zafar and Mateen, another cousin, went to fight in the armed struggle areas. They were disappointed with conditions and they returned. Zafar preserved revolvers. Akhtar put one in a box and sat on the box when the police came. When she moved to Muradnagar, she gave me the revolver and I kept it here.

Around that time, Jinnah gave a call for Black Flag demonstrations against the interim government. Every one followed, but we did not. My brothers put up a red cloth. The neighbours questioned this. When Raj (Bahadur Gour) and Jawad escaped from hospital—early 1947—they were brought here first. There was a lot of police everywhere. We shifted them in a rickshaw with purdah. In September 1949 my husband died. Raj asked us to go underground. Akhtar [my brother] came out on parole, but went back. I started learning Telugu and typing and collected funds for the Party. Tai, Yashodaben and Brij Rani all took part in activities. After the ban on the Party everyone started coming here. Progressive writers' meetings were held here. Differences in the Party increased. R.N. (Ravi Narayan Reddy) had gone to Bombay. Later a delegation consisting of Gopalan, Jyothi Basu, Muzaffar Ahmed came in 1951 to discuss whether the Armed Struggle should be called off. We arranged for their stay in the house opposite to ours. My father helped us to get this house. The whole house was lent to us for eight days. We used to hold meetings and long discussions at night.

We started forming women's groups (after the movement was called off). Comrade Ghani started two literary centres with his wife and others in Asifnagar. Women in purdah would not go from one centre to another. There was one night school in Aghapura and one more centre near the Mosque. We read stories and discussed Gorki. These continued for a long time. Some of the girls became Party members, worked for elections and came with me to Guntur

and Vijayawada. They are married and not doing anything now.

RAZIA: As the Party grew inactive, all these activities also came to an end.

BAJI: In 1952, after Makhdoom was released, he asked me to work among women. How could we work? Tai was not yet out. The issue of food prices came in handy. There was general unemployment among Muslims. These organizations could not attract them. Something more tangible was needed. Omkar helped us form the Women's Democratic Association. He framed the Constitution. Forty women were there learning crafts, sewing etc. We began to teach them to read and write. We brought newspapers and books. We started reading and discussion sessions. But we ran short of money. The Cooperative Inspector suggested forming a cooperative. Many college teachers joined as shareholders. The aim was to help women to earn a livelihood and acquire some skills. Many appeared for examinations and passed. The work goes on even now but with reduced strength. There are two teachers. Telugu and Urdu are taught upto the eight class. The Technical Education Board also recognizes the school. The students appear for examinations and the school has branches in Mahboobnagar and Adilabad.

Earlier we used to discuss issues such as purdah. We got many speakers like Razia Sajjad Zaheer, Ismat Chugtai, and so on, to come. Those days although women were illiterate, they asked questions and léarnt about things. Now, no one seems interested. They do not know about the Party nor about political issues. The Gulf money may be partly responsible. But the Party has no interest and gives no attention to such questions. The only time the Women's Democratic Association (WDA) is in the picture is when we have to attend a conference. We are shrinking financially and how long can I go on?

In 1952–53, we separated from AIWC at the Delhi meeting. At the Calcutta Conference in 1954, the Women's Democratic Federation was decided upon and a Constitution was framed. Renu Chakravarthy and Hajra Begum participated. The AIWC had far more rich people and I attended their meetings at Calcutta and Delhi. I took Badrunissa who was teaching here. She had a two

year old child. The news of her attending the conference appeared in the press here and her in-laws objected to it. Later she was divorced. She came to stay with us, but she was extremely disturbed. Her people wanted to get her married to an old man but she was not prepared to do that. She teaches here now and has done a lot of good work. Now many women come to the Cooperative Centre to learn but very few come to work. They do not need the work because someone or the other is outside India, earning a big salary. In fact my niece tried to hold classes but the response was very poor. I do not know how to pursue this work. Religious fanaticism is also an obstruction. Earlier they tried to defy purdah but women do not do it now. Earlier Muslim women joined processions and I took them in many campaigns and election meetings. Hindu women also seem as uninterested.

RAZIA: I used to talk to many comrades in those days about the struggle. While I was in prison I used to talk to a woman comrade who knew only Telugu. I kept a diary; if I find it, we could put many more details together. I had a room in the prison. There were other women there too—women criminals.

BAJI: Knowledge of Telugu would have helped us work much better. Many nice, very spirited girls were there. I do not remember their names now. We just went wherever we were asked to go. We never asked where and how we were going. When Ravi Narayan Reddy asked us, we simply got up and left. Once we went to Miryalguda with him. There was trouble and he was beaten up. We also went to Bhongir and Huzurnagar for election propaganda. One old woman took me home and gave me food. Comrades were always looked after well by the people.

RAZIA: I did my M.A. in 1944 and became a lecturer in Women's College which was at the Golden Threshold* at that time. I was interested in reading and writing. In 1966 I joined the University Arts College. I did my doctorate in Persian in Iran. We used to have literary discussions in college. Leelamani Naidu (Sarojini Naidu's daughter) was there. Generally there was not much interest in politics. I was supporting the family as father had also retired and

* Sarojini Naidu's house, now occupied by the University of Hyderabad.

the others were working in the Party. In spite of that, we did not feel fully equal to the men.

BAJI: We have a double responsibility. Men have to do only one type of work. Whereas we do both.

RAZIA: There was cooperation at home. Men also worked and all the children did some work. We all shared the housework. Yet one feels [sad, resentful] about it. Various factors have to be examined. It looks as though it's just the fact of being a woman. Centuries of social order have placed her in an inferior position. In spite of economic freedom, she continues to feel inferior to man and depends on him. This fear of being alone is terrible all over the world. She feels she cannot be alone. Young girls are afraid of going out alone, whereas man can be alone and nobody bothers about it. Man has greater freedom. Books are being written today on how women are treated. How these chains can be broken is to be seen. In an interesting book *Cinderella* this paradox of woman remaining unemancipated in spite of economic self-reliance has been highlighted and discussed. At that time we used to think economic independence was the main issue. I decided I would study and earn and not be dependent. I told my father so and he did not object and interfere. But our relatives criticized me. I did not think of marriage even later. I kept myself busy with my own work and never thought of it. Perhaps because I didn't find the right person at the right moment. All the proposals that came involved dowry, bargaining and so on. I reacted with hatred and never felt like talking to anyone. Father was also opposed to it. In my family many of us have not married.

BAJI: Kaifi was married to my youngest sister-in-law. He suggested that Zakia be married to Vishwamitra Adil because he was a Party member. That was the only consideration. That was the concept of a Party member. And they were married. We did not look at class and cultural background or individual capabilities and so on. Batul is another example. She used to attend meetings and recite Makhdoom's poetry and sing revolutionary songs. She was a nawab's daughter, but she came into the Party to avenge her mother's death. Her father had another woman. How long could such a woman last in the Party? It is another thing to come in with

some commitment and dedication. She had an eleven-year old son too. That was a short phase when a lot of men and women came into the movement, but they were not ideologically educated by the Party. Her basic consciousness was the Shiite sense of suffering, and that was her psychological base. She never transcended it. Later she left her husband. The Party supported her and tried for a reconciliation with him. It was no use. Zaheer is another example. She left the family under the most difficult circumstances, came into the Party and got married to Moin. Both remained active, she to the last minute. She died of cancer three years back. He is secretary to the Medak district Party unit.

There is no real work or activity of the Party now. We go on criticizing ourselves. I called all the girls and boys together and held meetings. Mahendra also came. But after the elections no one bothered. There is no concerted effort to educate young people and activise them in any way. Younger people have to be brought in. How much can we do? We worked for 25 to 30 years. After the parliamentary by-election I told Raj Bahadur that the largest number of votes polled by him were from Asifnagar—2200. Out of them 25–30 must be from our family. Raj was the candidate and therefore we felt impelled to work as a duty.

It is interesting to take a look at the children of the Party leaders. They do not do anything for the Party. Some have gone to Moscow and come back, but what have they done for the Party? My brothers: Zafar died in an accident; Anwar suffered—he was in Jalna jail and his health got ruined and he passed away later. His daughter is doing MSc. His wife studied later and took up a job. My other sister Rabia's children are well educated and are in Canada. They are gold medallists and well employed. Those days I used to be able to gather 500 women but now I can't even get 50.

RAZIA: It seems as though there is no past, no future. Only the present matters. That is the value system today.

Moturi Udayam

I was born at sunrise on a Friday and so my father called me Udayalaxmi. It was the 13th of October, 1924. There was something special about my birth, you see. My father—he didn't believe in things like gods and ghosts. He didn't believe in all those things. Here in Repalle Taluka, beyond the creek there is the Thatakulapalem or the Kammavaripalem as it is called. There was a yard there and they said that was a devil's yard. The devils were said to be *lambadi* devils that haunted the place. The story was that no human being could stay alive over there. Then my father, who was a stubborn man, said he would see what would happen, and went there—he had a field there, you see. My mother was pregnant then and the whole village pleaded with him not to do such a rash thing. She was going to have a baby, a precious piece of gold, and he shouldn't do this to her. But he said, 'no, this matter has to be settled here and now', and he took her there. And so I was born on that devil's mound. That is a real story. After I was born, my father's folk began to visit the devil's yard. All the relatives on my father's side lived near Tarimella. So we came away to Tarimella for my education.

My mother's people were *duggiralas* (from Duggirala village) from the Tenali Taluka. They were all more or less middle-class families. Then they gave my sister in marriage to my maternal uncle. My sister had no children and so they brought me up. My uncle worked as a *divan* in Challapalli. So I went to school in Challapalli and studied seriously. When I was in the fourth form, this marriage proposal came. Since my uncle was then *divan*, Hanumantha Rao, who had passed his SSC, came to his place looking for a job. My uncle thought this boy looks very bright and he is good looking. So he promptly told him, 'Why do you want to work? Why don't you teach our girl? We need a tutor.' And so he came to visit us. He had to teach us all and take us for a stroll in the

evenings. Those were his responsibilities. I was then about twelve years old. I grew up innocent. I knew nothing about the world or how women should behave. When the tutor was taking lessons, I used to insist that I would also teach the others after him. I was very mischievous. I was really innocent. I did not know the ways of the world. And to keep me happy they realized it was better to marry me off to him (the tutor). They believed he was a good fellow and so got us married.

But my father did not like the idea. He wanted his daughter to be a doctor, he did not want her to be married off. My father, Parvataneni Venkaiah, had seven hundred acres of land once. He was a man who had lived extremely well. Besides, he was a very progressive man from the beginning. It was during the Telangana Struggle, when everyone was being shot dead. Soon after Hanumantha Rao was arrested, they started the firings—in ten days, in fact. My elder daughter fell ill. We were at Ananthasagaram near Nuzhividu. Hanumantha Rao had come. We were having fun. We liked to lay bets on everything. For instance if we got a sack of green gram, we would say let's see who can toss it up. Then we thought let us find another test. There was a fine cane in our house. We decided that whoever could bear a blow of the cane without any tears would have stood a trial of strength. Hanumantha Rao said 'no tall stories, who can stand up and take it?' So I said 'I'll stand up: go on, strike me!' Then since he could not hit me hard enough to hurt, and I couldn't bear to hurt him, we asked a referee to hit us both. He struck me so hard that my leg got swollen immediately. Yet since I couldn't shed any tears I just bore up. But when it was Hanumantha Rao's turn to be struck, my father sent a message that the police were coming. We were trying to help him to escape somehow, but the police arrived and surrounded the house. Hanumantha Rao had come from Bezwada on a cycle, the cycle was still outside. They asked whose cycle it was: 'It's mine', I said. 'How can it be your cycle?' they asked, 'as if women ride cycles.' And I said, 'why not?' and got on to the cycle and took four rounds.

During this commotion Hanumantha Rao tried to climb up and hide in the loft. But a policeman saw him and arrested him. My father was also arrested. They beat him very badly—on his knees. My father abused them, saying 'you sons of whores, how dare you beat me?' They took them to Cuddalore jail. Nearly 300 people

were arrested at that time. . . you see. . . the question was what to do with them.

It was a time of severe repression. They had even set up a military camp. Any relative visiting us had to be taken to the military camp and identified. They had to declare where they had come from. They were not allowed to stay otherwise. It was not possible to visit either the families of the men arrested, or the men who were in jail. People were frightened of communists, as if they were the cholera or smallpox! This was about the time when some issues came up in the Party and some comrades were killed.

About the plight of children and the families of those arrested—well, we felt we shouldn't take any money from the Party. We felt that we should work hard and manage somehow or the other. We were full of enthusiasm. What could we do? We couldn't think of what work we could do! Who would keep us women? One place we went to was a cardboard box company. We went there, but the men looked funny and so we left saying it was no use. I hit on a plan then. There was a man who had set up a big cloth shop in Krishna Jilla. He was planning to close down as business was bad. Four or five of us went to him and said, 'why do you close down? Give us some cloth and we will go around the villages and sell it for you.' But we laid a condition. We said that we'd sell the cloth and he should charge us a fair price for it. Whatever profit there was we would draw a small sum for our spending and he should keep the rest and hand it over to our Party folk when they came to him. He hesitated and agreed finally. So we took this cloth along. There was this new poplin stuff, shirts and saris, we took this along. Along with the cloth there were new plastic tumblers. . . new in the market. We spread it out beautifully just like a store, in someone's house and asked everyone to come. We would ask the *munsiff* (village clerk) to tell everyone that someone had arrived to sell clothes. We would say to him, 'see, we are all poor women, we have studied till the fourth class. Who will give us jobs? We are scared to go to other places. Here it is safe.' They would ask, 'What happened to your men?' We would reply, 'they have all fallen sick. Her husband is dead. Her husband married against his parents wishes and they drove her out of the house. My husband joined the army. So we have to live like this.' Everyone believed us. First they bought the shirting material because it was good. Since we couldn't measure it out properly, we lost nearly five yards of cloth. So then

they said why don't you learn to measure. So that whole night we practised measuring out lengths of cloth. Another problem was that the women would each pick up a sari, exclaiming 'this is so beautiful!' and in the confusion we didn't know who had picked up the saris and two or three went missing.

We could never keep the accounts properly either. Such confusion. Anyway we'd make some excuse and go to all these places. Then when everyone was asleep, at midnight we'd slowly go to someone and ask them, 'where is so and so [a comrade] and what is he doing?' They would tell us. And we would say 'never mind, there is no cause to worry. We got a letter from jail. Once the Telangana struggle is over, it is our kingdom after all.' And we'd pack up the next day and leave as if we did not know a thing.

Our sales kept increasing. We went to West Godavari, Eluru and other places. We packed boxes this big. We always travelled by bus. We'd send a message that we'd arrive on a certain day. They would send a servant to meet us and he would carry the boxes on his shoulders on two ends of a thin pole, and set them down in some house nearby. What if we suffered a loss? In one way we felt we were doing a great thing. We felt our men should be told what we were doing. We decided to tour the whole of Andhra Pradesh. Every day we got some money. We used to feel very happy. It was only when we got home that we knew whether we had managed to make up the money we had spent or not. Then we would weep at the loss! By the time we went to the other village we had learnt the knack, the trick. We took good cloth along. Till then Kondappa used to sell a yard of silk at twelve rupees a yard. We went along and sold it for six rupees. That's how we sold the whole lot. Then they would say 'you sons of whores! our women folk came and sold the cloth to sell. They gave us such good bed sheets, so cheap.' We used to tell them, 'send word to the next village, tell them that our cloth vendors are coming.' Our Party families would feel very happy and celebrate when they heard that we were coming. They would feel that all of them should come and buy. That way all these families would come out very happily. Once when we alighted at a village there was a gang of them waiting for us with sticks. They said, 'you whores! who are you? We've worked so hard all these years and have been given contracts and is this what you do? Who are you? Which village do you come from? We will settle scores with you once and for all.'

Then we hit on a plan. One of us escaped as if to ease herself in the fields and sent word to one of the sympathetic families. I cannot remember all the other women's names. 'A gang from the CID is coming,' we said, 'you should send your servants to protect us.' Meanwhile I went up to them and said, 'what is this my man? Why are you creating such a ruckus? That too with women? It's like breaking a butterfly on a wheel! What can we do? Our men don't look after us and when we try something for our living, you attack us like this! What sort of injustice is this?' Then they said, 'why do you sell at a lower price than us and fling mud into our mouths?' By then our folk had got the message and come. Seeing them these people slipped away and we escaped. We sold quite a lot in that village. Our sales increased. We began to get nearly Rs 8000.

Actually, in our hearts there was such despair that the men were in jail. We would wonder when these troubles would cease. Then we got the news that Chandra Rajeshwar Rao's wife, Vellanki Annapurnamma and Hanumayamma were taken to a camp and were being beaten with tamarind twigs. I was very frightened. We wrote a letter to jail. It was coded like this—we hoped they would understand. 'The heat is terrible here. We cannot bear it. We have to overcome so many obstacles on our travels. Many times we are in such a state that we lose consciousness. The condition of the farmers in the villages is very desperate. Large hordes of birds devour their harvests and they weep at their lot. There is no peace anywhere. If we sell this cloth, we may be attacked. We really don't know what to do.' They understood the message. They wrote back: 'We are very happy with the work you have done so far. You can stop selling cloth now, and think of some other means for yourselves.'

We were worried about what to do next. As we came from Guntur we saw that a huge coal factory had been constructed there. In the factory huge pieces of coal were broken into smaller pieces. A lot of women do this work. So I told our folk, if we join the women and work here it may be useful. The CID and the Congressmen are watching us and if we don't work it will look suspicious. The Palaniappan Report also says this: 'She was never in politics. She just wandered about making a living that's all—but she was in the forefront in the field of political propaganda.' There was an Anglo-Indian officer there who was the manager. We had worn handspun saris because we did not want them to think we

were 'fine' folk. Three of us were quite dark—as dark as labourers. We put them in front and stood behind them. Then we had to plead with the foreman. We said, 'we beg of you, you will be blessed. We have children, we are dying without food. Please let us work.' They agreed to take us on. After we carried two loads of that coal, we got headaches and our bodies began to burn with the effort. Then one of us said, 'sister, I simply can't do this work.' I warned them, 'don't say another word,' I said, 'just do it for two days!' Then we would make all the women working there sit together and talk to them. That's how they became very close to us. They would say to us, 'you look so delicate, what can you do? Look at those bastards, they are sitting there smoking *bidis* and cigarettes while we work, it is so unfair.'

And so we began to fight with the men. Either you share the work equally, we said, or we won't work. This went right up to the manager. They told him some new people had come and had started making trouble. 'They are asking us to work,' they said. Then he called us. They used to pay the men eight rupees daily and the women five. We had to carry coal till the evening. My hair had started falling out. The manager did not know much Telugu. Once he sent for me. He abused me. Shouldn't I keep quiet? But I didn't. I said this was partiality, it was injustice. I spoke very angrily. Till then he hadn't looked at my face. Now, he looked at me and asked me to leave. I felt like crying. On twenty-five rupees we were living quite well. I thought about the children and felt even worse. I was also worried that someone might blurt out the truth. . . I wondered what story to tell him. . . and I wiped my tears quickly.

Then he said, 'you remind me of my mother. Don't be afraid. Just tell me the truth. I am very interested.' Having got the chance, I used his sympathy. I told him the same story. 'My husband was married against his will, he left to join the army. For three years there have been no letters. . . I don't know why. Maybe they won't come anymore. . . .'

He came out and announced that Narasamma would now be the *maistri* (foreman) for both men and women. We worked there for two months. How good it was!

Then when someone went to the jail for a visit he told the men, 'the womenfolk are fine, they have good jobs, and they have even become foremen!' Kakani Venkataratnam of the Congress was a veritable lion in the Krishna district. He said to the men, 'who are

these women? They came a day or two ago and are already sitting on our heads, we must try and find out who they are.' Then it came out that we were communists.

We had just tried to settle them in our arrogance. we never thought of the fact that we were being followed and watched, and that we would be discovered. Some people told the Congress people that I was Moturi Hanumantha Rao's wife. Then Kakani Venkataratnam sent a report to the company. 'They are all communists. They are traitors to the country. They will destroy your factory. You must oust them immediately.' They dismissed us promptly.. We came home weeping, but a young boy followed us. He said, 'mother, you need not do any work. I'll give you your pay, all of you—here take this,' and he gave me Rs 500. Then we said, 'we don't want money. The people will lift us high and worship us if we go to them. We want to toil hard and be useful to the people in some way. We don't need the money.' We threw the money on the road and it lay there till the poor lad picked it all up and went his way. And that was the end of that job.

What were we to do? We suffered many hardships like this. Now it had got known that we were communists, it was no use trying to hide. What should we do? We discovered that there was a tooth powder factory there. So we agreed to make packets of tooth powder outside. The women would make the packets at home, and I would take the packets on my bicycle and deliver them. I used to do five or six trips a day. This way we had no problems. Then we thought that the cloth merchant would get some ideas. After all he had all our money with him. So we went to him and said, 'give us the ten percent you promised. We left a balance with you.' He said, 'there is no balance, you spent all the money yourselves. We gave it to you at a loss.' Anyway he gave us about Rs 3000. We took the three thousand rupees, but when we came home we found our folk were being released. My husband came and said that he had to meet the leaders who were underground. They didn't have a pie on them. We gave them our money. We fed them and looked after them in this manner.

When the men were in Cuddalore jail, we had to take all the people from Andhra there. We were fifty of us. They don't speak our language there. They spoke Tamil. There was a *choultry* there. We stayed in that *choultry*. We were very scared of the people there. They looted the people from Andhra...

There were two very young women with us—probably 18 or 20 years old. Many of them were newly married. Now they had to be taken there once a year to see their men in jail—and just think of their dreams. They wanted to show their husbands—this sari or that jewel. So much affection. They wouldn't listen to me when I told them not to wear these jewels. I told them it was dangerous but they wouldn't listen. My daughter Tanya knew Tamil. She used to tell me, 'Amma, they are talking about us.' They gave us five rooms. The women were all frightened. They took off their jewels and gave them to me and said, 'sister never mind, let us all stay in the same room.' We bolted the doors and went to sleep. We had to rise at 6.00 a.m., bathe, get into horse-drawn carts and go to the jail. Really one could make a film of these stories. That list of names is with Hanumantha Rao. I don't remember them so clearly. We hardly slept the whole night. We were so anxious to see our men. Moreover we had to let them know the news outside. We had to give them the information without getting caught in the act. When I saw our women dreaming and painting up their faces to see their men, I could hardly hold back my tears. Sometimes a child was born and the father had not seen the child, so the child would be dressed up. Before the interview was granted, while they waited, they would comb their hair quickly under the tree. Such problems! I never used to write what I had to say in a letter. I like to compose songs. That jailer was newly married. He and his wife would read our letters, enjoy them and then hand over to these men. He would give the others their letters but he wouldn't give Hanumantha Rao his letters.

There was a kind of enthusiasm in that political situation. Hanumantha Rao wrote a book about Sri Sri, about his poetry. Chalasani Prasad published his essay as a book. That book was dedicated to Hanumantha Rao. There are many songs that I composed. I wrote, 'You who reside in Cuddalore jail,' and 'you who reside in Udayam's heart,' etc. That letter was read by our leaders in jail and then they would read it out to all the people in jail to give them some enthusiasm. The whole jail would read my letters, you know. So that jailer wondered what this Udayam was like, and he had a very different idea of me. He said, 'Mother, we read your letters, my wife and I, and came very close. I'll give you a special room. He said he would give me a chance to be with my husband. So I said, 'You son of a whore! I've brought all these

people and you only want to give me a special room? I don't want it!' When we went there all the detenues would get very upset. They wouldn't sleep for three or six months. Some even fell ill. Now all of us had to interview them in a single hall. There was a scramble for the corners. Whoever got a corner was the lucky one! How many prayers that girl must have said to get that corner on that day! Really to think of our life in those days. . .

Hearing that their people were coming they would save up their allowance, keep boiled eggs, save milk in glasses, buy tooth-brushes and toothpaste and chocolates. They would feel that if our folk come, then news will come. There was a shortage of sugar then. So we used to pack sugar in paper packets and send it to them. But they suspected this and caught us the next day. Once we had to send an important document to jail. We stitched it into a new slipper, packed the slippers in a new box and sent it. Another time, my younger daughter was some months old, six months or a year, she was fair. We would pack three or four letters into her clothes and take her to jail. They would all pick up the child because she was smart, fondle her, take her inside and remove all the letters. . . once the warden got suspicious and they caught us. We tried many such tricks to get messages to them.

After all that trouble and expense sometimes they would give us only half an hour a day. There would be such a desire to express something. They couldn't find the words! We couldn't find the words either! All of us would have tears in our eyes. Some would say the ones who had children were lucky. While giving them the children they could fall on the men and hold them or something. Once I had to hand them an important document. We felt that we should never betray the expectation of the Party—we must somehow fulfil their expectations. Once I did this and another time another woman did it successfully. We did it like this. We had only ten minutes. Once everyone was seated we couldn't do anything. Whatever we had to do, had to be done the moment we entered. In the beginning I gave a kind of signal. As Hanumantha Rao entered, I fell on him embraced him, and kissed him. Everyone burst out laughing. By then I had sneaked the document into his hands. Everyone in the hall was gaping at me—saying how can Udayam behave like this (what a thing for Udayam to do . . .) He also was lost in laughter. But I said, 'Oh! you can laugh at me later, but please go in and bring me some coffee.' Then he brought me some

coffee. The next time we pretended that a woman had had a heart attack. As Chencheyya came in, she fell unconscious into his arms. Then she slipped her hand behind him and pushed the document in. As she fell, I yelled, 'Where's the doctor? Where's the doctor?' and collected the people in the jail in a crowd. What does it matter how we managed, so long as we got the documents safely to them?

After the men were released there were struggles and programmes of action. Now we have forgotten so much of it. How did the Telangana Struggle come about? Our people went there as squads, offered shelter to the families, we took a house on rent in Prajashaktinagar. I procured all their needs from the bazaar and carried them on my cycle. We used to make a list of what the people wanted and so on. Once Devulapalli Venkateshwara Rao's wife said they needed a *candil*. I thought *candil* was a medicinal powder and searched all over Bezwada. No one knew what it was. I thought, 'Oh my mother! she asked for something and we can't get that—and she's a leader's wife!' I went to such a lot of trouble. I asked all the leaders. They all said they didn't know. So I went back and told her, 'what am I to do, this isn't available anywhere in the whole of Bezwada.' 'What do you mean not available? It's available on every road—it's like a lantern,' she replied. It took us many days to understand the Telangana dialect.

Sometimes the comrades in the forests would be hurt. We had to arrange hospitals for their treatment. The senior nurses had rooms at the back. We used to get the wounded men treatment for their wounds there. Prasad's father-in-law, a landlord called Raghupathi Rao, some other men, and I were in charge of this work. They would want quinine. We used to supply all this secretly. There was a fair man there—Paranjape—I used to work with him. Once we got a message. Our squad had gone hungry for nearly a week. They had caught a young calf, roasted it and eaten it up greedily. Having eaten it up in their hunger—just plain meat, but maybe it had got stuck in their teeth and got infected—they all got high temperatures and fell down unconscious. They started smelling foul. . . then Paranjape had to send some medicines and cure them. It took a long time. Acchamamba used to help and advise. Each used to work at their own level in many ways. There was no cyclostyling so we used to write copies.

I remember once Swarajyam came. She was very young. But she was a terrific speaker! She was known as Jhansi Laxmi and we looked

forward to meeting her. But when I first saw her I thought what a silly girl this looks like! But we held a public meeting for her. Good Lord, how much money we collected! We collected all that the families required. If anyone from the Party was exposed it would create problems. So that's what I did, I was not directly in the Party or in the struggle. I never knew what Hyderabad was like.

I grew up without the feeling that I was a girl. Right from childhood. So they always gave me such jobs. Even if they needed technical things I would do it for them. I would do anything I was instructed to do, without questioning anything, like a soldier. Right from childhood I never liked the blouses girls wore. I used to wear shirts. I used to wear socks and shoes. I couldn't walk without them. Even to the Mahila Sanghams, I went dressed like that. I don't have the energy that I had in those days. Nowadays if an instruction is given, one wants to know so many details but in those days if an order was given, we just obeyed blindly. That is the sign of a true communist. We worked in the Mahila Sanghams. I was the Joint Secretary of the state organization. If we held a meeting, people wouldn't come here, they would watch from a distance or look out of their windows. Do you know what the people who opposed us called us? They would say, 'what sort of women are you—like ferocious bulls that have been marked you are on the streets. What is this Mahila Sangham? Do *kamma* women come out on the streets? What are these meetings?' And they wouldn't let their women come. Where was their sincerity? We would shoulder our bags and walk five and six miles a day, four or five of us together. We never found it hard. So we slowly started the Mahila Sanghams. We would get hold of our women comrades, harangue them, and tell them to bring the whole village. They would bring four women. They would stand far away and listen to us. Then under Chandra Rajeshwar Rao's leadership they raised the slogan of *Ideal Housewives*. This meant that we had brought the movement to a stage, so they wanted each of us to take charge of one village and work there. In three months we had to teach the villagers everything—to cook vegetables without peeling them, to read and write, to sing songs. And so we would gather the women in the village together and sit and talk. Even sixty-year old women would play *kho-kho**. We had songs and games—we

* A boisterous run and catch game which adult women usually do not play.

conducted them so well. I'd take part in all of it. We even set up children's Sanghams. In the Balasangham we sang

How much brother Hitler—fellow?
What is his strength—my fellow?
If all of us get together—my fellow
Can he get to beat us—my fellow?

We did *lambadi* (tribal) dances and collected subscriptions. We used to sing the songs women sang while pounding grain. One of them went like this

Plant a seed on barren land
The couple is cold and there is no fun
ah - *ha*, ah - *ha*, ah - *ha*.
Who is there to pick the jasmine in the forest?
What can a woman do with a weak old man?
ah - *ha*, ah - *ha*, ah - *ha*.

In Tadipatri, ten thousand people came for a meeting. We had learnt this song and we were pounding away and singing this song, vigorously. Suddenly Hanumantha Rao roared out like a lion, 'Stop that song!' We nearly died of fright! 'Don't you have any sense? What do you think? What is that song you are singing? Get off the stage. An old man is of no use. Is this what your Mahila Sangham is about?' We were so frightened. 'How were we to know? Someone composed the song and we sang it,' we replied. We then went to Rajeshwar Rao, weeping, 'What is this? We've left our children and our husbands behind. We've worked so hard and all we get is abuse? And you say patience! Patience!' We wept bitterly. Then he made us sit down and held a class for us. That's not it. The song was a mistake. 'Why will he say such things to you otherwise!' he asked. And so he comforted us.

Then Acchamamba was made to stand for an election. We were sent as a squad. The squad would split up and move around canvassing for Acchamamba. They called us the 'contract marriage gang.' What happened was, Venkataramaiah (although his first wife was alive) had married Acchamamba. She was in love with a doctor called Vithal Rao. They had lived together. They said they would exchange garlands later. After all the arrangements were

made, his sister locked him up in a room and prevented him from coming for the marriage as she wanted him to marry her daughter. She finally got him to do that. Acchamamba was disappointed and went away to England. Before she left, she had become close to Venkataramaiah. Then they got married. That was a contract marriage, they say. Apparently Sundarayya performed that marriage. We went so eagerly to canvass but the Congress fellows sent some young men to harass us. So we went to her and said, 'Sister, we won't go alone, we will all come with you.' So she said, 'Let us go to the place where they are slandering us.' Then I hit upon a plan. Let us take brass waterpots in our hands. The Congress fellows followed us saying they would make contract marriages with us, so we let them come near and said, 'What's this? What is this contract marriage, tell us!' So they said, 'Oh don't you know? Didn't Acchamamba have a contract marriage?' So I turned around and swung the brass pot at him. It cut his lip and broke his teeth. He was bleeding heavily. Now what next? They went around announcing, 'These communist women are beating up our men!' As we went along, our people warned us, 'The Congressmen are coming, heavily drunk, go in and bolt the doors.' Acchamamba was in the garden. I bolted the doors quickly. We had heard the stories of Telangana after all. A man had already sent chilli powder to our camp. We took the chilli powder out. We poured it into winnowing baskets and held it ready. Then fifty of them broke down the doors yelling, 'You whores! come out! See what we'll do to you.' And they all came in, you know. The other women were really scared. Our men had not yet got the message. Messengers had gone on cycles to tell them. But these men had entered, we were throwing the chilli powder and there was a melee. They shouted, 'Guntur Andhra Mahila, down down!' They said that they would see that a case was booked against us.

After this struggle was over we had a discussion with Rajeshwar Rao and Acchamamba. We siad, 'Look at the lives of these great people. Look at Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, she took a divorce. Acchamamba's life is like this! Who is to be our model? Why has Acchamamba married like this? Because of that we had to take all this nonsense.' Rajeshwar Rao then explained in detail that is how life is. 'Kamala Devi wanted a divorce and got it—what's wrong with that?' At that time we didn't think deeply on these questions. We used to think very mechanically. We would have an ideal and dedicate ourselves to it. We didn't think like this, analytically and

seriously. I was as innocent as a young girl in those days. They were all very affectionate with me. I always jumped around—never walked. 'Her body has grown but her mind is still young,' they would say indulgently. Once a woman asked me, 'Dear Udayam, have you taken your bath,' meaning are you pregnant? I said, 'Grandma, what do you mean? I had my bath long ago.' That question meant was I pregnant—I didn't understand. Look at my state! They killed me with food for four or five days. They would ask me what I craved for and cook it immediately! I wondered why they had suddenly become so considerate. I didn't tell anyone. When I asked a few of my friends they said, 'You don't understand, that is how they cook for you!' Then they suddenly said, 'What's all this? She is eating so heartily! Not even a trace of nausea or anything! We must find out what the matter is.' Then they asked me. 'You said you had had a bath—then what is this unholy appetite?' So I said, 'What about a bath? I have one every day! I can't manage without one you know!' Then they yelled, 'Oh you wretch! You've ruined us! How you ate for a whole week!' I was so innocent in those days. Everyone had morning sickness and vomiting. I never had any such problems. All I felt was a great hunger. If there were no cashewnuts in the jar, I felt like crying. My mother would cook hot rice for me four or five times. Acchamamba used to tell me that nothing was wrong with my health.

I was one of the editors of *Andhra Vanitha*. Later they sealed the *Andhra Vanitha* magazine.* I wrote the book *Bala Bharatam*. I collected statistics on children and wrote a book, the government chaps read the book and sent me to Delhi for an All India Children's Conference. That was my first trip to Delhi. Then he said, 'How will you go alone? I'll send someone with you!' I said, 'No, I'll go alone.' And I went, I took the address and got to the Party office.

I wrote a book called *Adarsha Deepalu*. I also wrote about the women's movement. Do you know when this tear gas first came? The Prakasam Ordinance† came and the Mahila Sangham as well as the Rashtriya Sangham§ decided to oppose it on a big scale. Five

* A magazine run by women in the movement.

† A special Emergency measure passed by the Congress ministry under the leadership of Prakasam in January 1947. Many Communist Party cadres and leaders were arrested under the Ordinance without trial.

§ The State level Mahila Sangham.

thousand delegates came. We took out a procession and the Government used tear gas. They told us at the Party office to keep onions with us and nothing would happen. So we went, violating Section 144. They fired—bang! bang! The women in front Acchamamba, Vellanki Annapoornamma were all asthma patients. Jyosyabhatla Subbamma was also in front. They all fell down. They threw another shell but that didn't burst. Then I picked it up and said, 'You bastard, throwing this at so many women,' and I ran chasing him. When the gas was released everyone chewed up their onions and didn't smell the gas. In that confusion they had all climbed down into the Bandar canal. We tried to climb up the banks to start the procession again, but we kept slipping down all the time. People around were watching but no one helped. Anyway we pulled ourselves out somehow. They arrested us all. That was a farce. They took us to Nandigama jail. Manikonda Suryavati's mother-in-law was there. They were all frightened when they heard that the military was taking them away. We raised very loud slogans in the police van but Acchamamba and others said, 'Oh, be quiet sisters! As it is we are so frightened, how do these slogans help?' Then one old woman called out, 'Mother, Udayam! What shall I do? I can't hold my water any more.' So I said, 'Grandma don't worry, sit where you are and let it flow into that corner. That bastard is sitting in that corner let it go under him.' And so he got up saying, 'Water, there's some water here!' We were all laughing away. All of them used to say, 'You are very childish.' Tomorrow when we need water in the morning we'll have to ask them. And you are doing things like this!' Acchamamba was very serious.

The idea was to go out of our cells often. Thousands of people would come to see us, and we wanted to spend as much time as possible outside. There used to be a bucket to draw water. We'd draw one bucket of water up carefully and then drop the bucket into the well. It was a big well. The wardens had to go to so much trouble to fetch it up again that they would say, 'Mother, we give salute to you, but let us draw the water for you.' Then we would cook and make a dal curry. Everyone got diarrhoea and cholera, there was panic. Dronavali Anasuya had left a baby that was a few days old. She used to get milk fever and we had to squeeze out the milk from her breasts till our hands ached. We used to shout, 'Shame on the Congress Government. Shame on the treatment of

women.' There were sentries there. We had no materials to write anything with, but I was very good at picking pockets. We got pencils and wrote *burrakathas* on the jail walls. Then we put up street plays. There is a play of mine called *Chevulapilli Magistrate*. Even the police used to enjoy our plays. We would also dance very aggressively.

> 'These are not stories mother – (chorus) Tandana tana
> These are not legends of Rama and Ravana – (chorus)
> Tandana tana.'

After our baths we asked for saris and they gave us two dhotis stitched together. We wore these white saris. We'd shout, 'Shame on the Congress Government which gives dhotis instead of saris.'

After fifteen days we were released. That is the story of my jail life! They booked cases against all of us. Suryavathi was kept as a detenue, Vidya Kannuga, a Party worker from Bombay, came to rest and got arrested. She was a very interesting woman. In her bag she had sanitary tampons. The police found them and thought they were bombs! They called the SP and others. They asked her, 'What is this, it has a fuse?' We also had never seen one, even Acchamamba didn't know what those tampons were. So Vidya said to the police, 'You call yourselves educated, you don't even know this! Here read this,' and she gave them the instructions. Yet they fined us a thousand rupees each. Though some of us felt it was fine in jail in many ways—we could write, tell stories, hold classes—some couldn't sleep the whole night. A couple of other women in jail became communists.

There was a Swiss woman who visited us called Mellie. She was also very interesting. I used to take her around everywhere on my cycle. We held a conference. Five thousand people rallied. We wanted the State conferences to be very good. Then Mellie embraced me and kissed me. Basava Punnaiah saw this and said, 'Who is that fellow kissing Udayam on the stage—blah blah; What is this behaviour Udayam? Where is our tradition? We must settle this!' Even when I told him she was a woman he didn't believe me! Only when I called Uppala Laxmana Rao to convince him did he believe me! She had a flat bosom and wearing a pyjama-shirt she looked like a man. That was the story. . .

There was Azra Begum. She said, 'Udayam, you must help me! I

can't give a speech unless I smoke a cigarette!' So I said OK and took her to the bathroom. She quickly smoked two cigarettes, one after the other. What a panic there was—everyone rushed in there saying the bathroom had caught fire! It was built of thatch and palm leaves. I told them it was nothing and that we could manage, but they came rushing anyway. When they found out they said, 'What is this—a woman smoking?' So I said, 'Don't women smoke, brother?' The whole meeting was in disarray. I thought all the women from the north smoked. I saw even Sarojini Naidu's sister Suhasini smoking. They used to say, 'Oh Udayam is so proud of women who smoke.'

At that time we were performing *burrakathas*. There was a man called Nasser. Haven't you heard about his *burrakatha*? We learnt that story also. Ours was the first *burrakatha* squad. We learnt how to perform *burrakatha* in Guntur. Chintala Koteswaramma, Parvati and all of us used to recite the tale. When the All India Women's Conference was held in Tenali we performed it. They dropped biscuits from helicopters. Some Russians had come. They took photographs of our *burrakathas* and put them up in Moscow. We put up a play called *Midwife*. It was all about the danger of cutting the cord with a rusty knife, and dying of tetanus.

About this time Madhusudhana Rao's wife and I went to a nature cure clinic. We wanted to lose weight to work better. They gave us lemon juice. That's all. We never felt tired no matter how many hours we kept standing. Now my strength is all gone. I'm not even hungry. If I speak for an hour, I feel like looking for a seat.

After the Japanese invasion, the women were given training and wore knickers. Later in the conference, three of us were photographed and the photograph published in a book. The women, filled with joy, would say, 'Udayam, why do you need a mike, even if there are lakhs of people!' My voice was so powerful. Even now if I shout they say, 'Your years are upon you, but your voice is still strong!' We went to Delhi for a festival. They were so thrilled that they came to shake our hands. The song that we sang about Hitler and Stalin was translated into English for them. Hanumayamma and I were dancing very vigorously. We were almost at the end of the song. One of the women dancing was having her period. Her sari had got loose and the cloth she was using fell out. As I was dancing, I fell to the ground, picked it up and hid it in my shirt! What else could I have done? I was afraid Nehru would see it. What did she do? Mukkamala Nagabhushan was glaring at her. She was

frightened. In the end they said, 'You did a great thing.'

Since I was a child I have worn a bodice, *banian* (vest) and a shirt. I didn't wear a dress till I was thirteen. I began to wear a sari only after my Tanya was born. For five years my mother had to help me wear the sari. I didn't even enjoy feeding my baby. She would wake me up saying, 'Wake up, the child is crying,' and I would grumble. My mother really had a difficult time. I don't know how to hold a broom. My life has passed like that. Now I feel in a mood to cook, once in a way. I have no superstitions. I have achieved whatever I wanted. From learning to cycle, to my job. Do you know I was the only lady medical representative in the whole of India? I have no fears. I worked for one and a half years and supported Hanumantha Rao. I even supported my son-in-law and made him a doctor. Now he gets fifteen hundred and has an Ambassador car. I've done a lot for the Party. I made my driver a communist.

During the China War our leaders were arrested. *Prajashakti* was stopped. Sundarayya used to say—don't give up your job, the children must complete their education. We went to West Godavari. We collected subscriptions of Rs 5000 for the paper. In one week I got Rs 15,000, came to Bezawada, paid the Marwadi and released the paper. Some women and friends pledged their jewels in the bank and gave me the money. On the whole I gave nearly 30–40 thousand rupees to the Party. Everyone in Delhi wondered who I was. It was like this—when I wanted something to succeed in the Party, I would work day and night without food or sleep. . . .

Brij Rani Gour

I am from Hyderabad. My family was very backward, yet I wanted to join some social organization. Sarojini Naidu had a lot of influence on me. When I read about her work in the newspapers, I used to feel that I should also do something. But I grew up in a totally apolitical atmosphere. I attended Aruna Asaf Ali's meetings twice or thrice. Later I got an opportunity to participate in Arya Samaj meetings. But I was not satisfied as I had no regular work. I used to rush wherever there was something happening. At that point there was a lot of pressure on me.

First, about my marriage. I was very young and do not even remember the occasion. As I was changing in response to what was happening around me, my in-laws started ill treating me. My mother-in-law and my husband started scolding and beating me. I could not bear this any longer and ran away from the house. I did not know where to go. I had a friend called Rukmini. Her mother was a sweeper in the Mahila Mandali. I joined the Mahila Mandali with her help—they helped me a lot and slowly I became a social worker. I also studied a little bit. . . After a while, I came into contact with the Communist Party—but not directly. Pramila Ben and Yasoda Ben used to work at the Mandali, and they helped me a great deal. They were already in the Party and gave me an opportunity to participate in plays and Party meetings. We worked in the Mahila Unit of the Party, Mahila Navjivan Mandal. Some Telugu-speaking women, Nimmagadda Satyavathi and Arutla Kamala, used to work in the Andhra Yuvathi Mandali. Then the Party played an important role in the Telangana anti-*jagirdari* movement. At that time I was also working as a Hindi teacher, apart from working in the Party. I used to look after the comrades who got beaten up by landlords (*deshmukhs*). Pulla Reddy, Swarajyam's brother Muralidhar (he is the director of a press now), Narsing—they were all beaten. While working in this way I also found a change coming over my political life. I started going from

house to house to sell a paper by P. C. Joshi produced from Delhi. Some Muslim comrades (prisoners), Shabana's father Kaifi Azmi and Jafri also used to come. The result of all these activities and influences was that I was further politicised and wanted to participate actively in politics. Meanwhile the first meeting of the Congress was held here. After I attended that meeting I joined the anti-Razakar Movement.

In 1946, the problem of the Indian Union—whether Hyderabad State should join the Union or not—arose. Several comrades were arrested. I felt strongly that I should also join. They objected, however, saying that no other women were participating. I went away to my mother who used to live at Dhulpet. There I gathered young women and men to fight the Razakars. We organized them in batches to keep a vigil and not allow the Razakars to enter our area. Women's squads also used to keep a vigil during the night. Our plan was to hoist the [Party] flag on the 15th of August and somehow get arrested. Those were the days of intense Razakar activities. The Party decision was to hoist the flag wherever there were Party people. I raised the flag in Goshapet High School. Dhulpet was very tense at that time. Women went from place to place shouting slogans about Bharat and throwing flowers—it was like a festival. Young boys also joined shouting jai, jai . . . then the police came and surrounded us. I escaped along with another person, Shankar. But we didn't know what to do. It would be all right to get killed, we felt. But to be captured by the Razakars would be terrible as one didn't know what they would do. We decided to get arrested, and three days later along with Swami Ramanand Thirth, Melkote and Yasoda Ben, we hoisted the flag. Swamiji was arrested. I was not. There was a group of Socialist Party Workers at Bansilal school who gave us shelter for the night and let us go the next morning. Later, at Begum Bazar—I don't remember the names properly—we were arrested. I was in jail for six months. After I was released I went underground as I was afraid I might be arrested again. There was work to be done in the Party.

I was very upset when I was arrested. I was beaten in the lathi charge. When the police were beating the people, I was angry I couldn't bear it and I also beat the police—not with sticks but with my hands—this news appeared in the papers also. Nobody could believe that I could do a thing like that, I had no strength, no stamina. I do not remember what happened later—perhaps I lost

consciousness. Even after they took me to the police station I was beaten badly. 'What sort of a woman are you? How many husbands do you have?' they asked. At that time I had no relationship with anyone. I was very correct in conduct. I had not yet decided to get married to Gour Sahib. But they spoke very rudely and threatened me. It was all right if I was beaten, but they said terrible things. 'Resign from the Party,' they said, 'We will give something, some compensation'. They kept me in custody for two days. Shankar Rao was also arrested with me, but they kept him separately. At that time Melkote and Swamiji were also in the control-room. I said only one thing, 'whatever you may say I will not agree. Do not bother me unnecessarily. I will not agree to resign.' Sometimes I was so low, I did not know whether there was any life in me or not. They threatened me even in jail. 'Remove your bangles, remove your kumkum,' they said. They tortured me, made me stand for long hours. They would not allow me to sit. They took me to the jail when it was dark. There was no one else there—no political prisoners. They shut me in a room all alone and locked it. Outside there were women criminals. I locked the door from the inside. Four or five days later, Melkote and Yasoda Ben were brought. That gave me courage. They were placed in 'A' class in the prison while I was in the 'C' class with criminals. When they gave me food along with the other prisoners I felt miserable, unable to eat. . .

I forgot to tell you that I had two children. I used to think of them often and feel sad. They were with my aunt's son (Siva Prasad). When my father died, my aunt brought me up. My children were young when I was in jail. My elder son was six and the younger one was two. They didn't bother my children, but my uncle was kept in custody. They didn't tell me whether they were troubled. I couldn't see the children. My uncle and aunt couldn't bring them to see me because they were afraid that the police might hurt the children.

About life when we were underground. When Sita Devi and I were not underground, we learnt to cycle and wield a stick. I didn't go to Vijayawada for training. I was here at Himayatnagar, this used to be our kingdom. This training was useful when we went underground. I used to teach women—as much as I knew—ways of protecting themselves. I taught them how to live in the squads and protect themselves, how to supply medicines secretly. We

created a lot of trouble when we were in jail. There were others with me—some Congress women. I do not remember all of them, but Nimmagadda Satyavathi and Sarojini Ben were also there. Once, I went to the Osmania General Hospital to see some comrades who were beaten up and hurt. The Razakars came and gheraoed us. I managed to escape and got into a bus which was about to start. I was never caught again. I was underground till the elections were over. In the villages the *deshmukhs* used to help the Razakars. There was no protection for us. We used to hear that the Razakars used to rape women and cut off their noses and breasts. We also used to hear about the atrocities in Suryapet. Our work was to provide shelter to those who came there and to give them treatment.

It is not easy to describe conditions in underground life . . . we stayed wherever we had to; We had to say whoever was there was our husband, eat if there was food, starve otherwise. We were often forced to stay awake all night . . . any little sound, we would get up to look. It was a drama till morning . . . this one is my husband, that one my brother-in-law. Cook and eat whatever there was. If the government was a little clever they could have easily arrested us. Wherever we went, we needed a new pot, a broom, and a mat. When we left a place, we used to leave those things behind. After we left people would know that the communists had lived there. But as long as we were there, we were like a family.

Yes, I used to perform *pujas* before I joined the Party. I used to believe in God. I stopped all this because of certain incidents in my life. I realized my life was not going to improve no matter which God I invoked. I realized I had to work hard if my life was to be better. I did not like that traditional atmosphere . . . I didn't like the scoldings and beatings. Then I began to understand my problems—the problems of women. Later when I came out into society, I understood many other things. I knew that I would not commit suicide, that I had to do something. Many women commit suicide. That was not what I would do. Reading about the political struggles in the country as well as Sarojini Naidu's book helped me to get ideas. I felt I had to go forward and to do something.

I married again in 1947 when I was in the Party. It was the Party who got Pramila, and my sister married. The Party knew everything about my life. For some years, our Party believed that we, members, should not get married. Because after we marry, we

fall into some trap or the other. Secondly if we have to sacrifice for the movement, it is more difficult. We cannot do anything if we have children. That is why the Party decided that we should not get married. But it did not prevent those who wanted to marry. Because it was a tough period, there was a circular asking us not to marry. We kept discipline on the basis of that.

I did not come into the Party because of him. I met him long after I had joined the Party—sometime after I was released from jail. They felt that it would be difficult to be alone in underground life. I also felt it was difficult to be alone in the Party. That was when I was ready to marry. Even after I married, we had to live separately, many times. Gour Saab was sent to Nalgonda. I was carrying Tamara—she is a doctor now. After he left, she was born. I didn't know where to stay. There were all sorts of problems. At that time it was the Muslims who helped me. It was they who kept me and my sister. He returned only a year later. After the elections Gour was arrested. The Party was also in a precarious condition. I felt miserable then. Some Muslim comrades, Amina Dhage and many others, helped me. There were some youngsters, like Narsing who used to bring food. People used to bring whatever they had.

I met them (my family) after I was released from jail. But then the reputation of the Telangana Movement was such that nobody let me come near them, they were so scared. But the effect of the Party was different on those who were in the movement. They felt that (the Party) was doing good things. I did not like the atmosphere in the family (before I joined the Party), that is why I left. Nobody else from my family came into the Party. Now, my family people don't ignore or dismiss me. They have a certain regard for me. They don't thrust their ideas on me. They know they cannot change me. I've helped get many of them married. I help them as much as I can. My mother-in-law (who is dead now) and my sister-in-law didn't think it was my fault that my marriage broke up. Gour's parents, knew that I was already married, but they didn't say anything. Anyway, the situation was such that I took permission from the Party, but where was the chance to take permission from anyone else? Even then, they looked after me well. My (earlier) sisters-in-law and these (Gour's sisters) are friendly with each other.

There was a lot of discussion about the situation before it was

decided to call off the movement in 1951. Many young boys who worked with us—those who came from *jagirdar* families and worked with us, began to betray us and help the enemy capture us. For example, the courier who was with us, revealed our whereabouts. He told the police which den we were in and how we used to move around. That is why we were caught, otherwise there was no question of our getting caught. Gour and Krishnamurthy were also caught because they were betrayed—that is, when others who had been arrested were being beaten up, they revealed secrets. Some of those who came from landlord's families went and joined the Congress and turned against us. In such a situation there was no way to support the Party. People were getting killed everywhere—in dens, in forests. In such circumstances even I felt it was better to move back. I used to read Lenin—if one took one step forward, when necessary one would also have to take two steps backward. The movement got confined to some districts of Telangana. All the important leaders of Telangana were dying. That is why we felt it was better to stop. Some people didn't feel so, but they didn't do anything. That is to say, they didn't gain any strength to take the movement forward. There ceased to be any relationship between us and the cadres—between us and the people.

We were doing what we could do after the struggle had been called off, and we came into the open. But about women . . . we did not have separate women's organizations during the armed struggle. When there is a movement, there is only one goal, one direction, and all the organizations joined together. After we came into the open, we had our own organizations and we are struggling to the extent we can. But it is far from what we wish. These days, people have more ambitions, desires. They want a good salary and so on. But those days when we went out, we had only one sari, sometimes a torn one. But we would go and talk to the officers and come back. Now, if the sari is a little crumpled they won't even come up and talk to us in the office. We are also limited by such values. The atmosphere has changed completely. At that time we had the confidence that we had a weapon even if we didn't have anything else. Now we have none. What can we do? Only when people believe in one ideal and stand as one, can we have a movement. Look at what is happening now. Is there anyone who stands for one idea? There are too many Parties. The Marxists separated from our Party, the Naxalites separated from them.

There are groups even among them. We are fighting amongst ourselves. There is no unity. It is not that we should not correct the mistakes committed. Instead of fighting the enemy, we are fighting ourselves.

I feel sad when I think of our comrades. I want to embrace them with love, fight together like before in the struggle . . . (though we belong to a different Party). When Swarajyam and Udayam meet me now they are very affectionate to me. I also feel that way. After all we did fight together. There are walls between us now, political walls. That is why we are not able to meet often. Even then, we meet now and then. Only when we all join, is it possible to do something, otherwise we will give more chances to the enemy and the enemy will profit. Now there is such confusion, some of us support Indira Gandhi, others China. The enemy says 'Naxalites' and kills people; otherwise they call them Marxists and kill them. Finally they will say these are communists and kill them too.

During the struggle I wasn't in the Central Committee, but in the Hyderabad Committee. We used to discuss, criticize, and also have self-criticism. Even now we do it. But at that time, there was a certain force, politically. But now it is . . . socially everything is mixed up . . . what is the use now? What changes can you bring with sewing classes and cooperative centres? Think of wielding arms and coming from there to sewing classes! What a shame! Look at this *basti* [where she lives and where we met her]. It was full of huts. I fought and we occupied the land. Now they say I haven't done anything. Then they said I wouldn't be able to fight alone. But I didn't listen even to the Party. Now people have become selfish and are getting used to comfortable lives. Today they are in this Party, tomorrow in another. They go wherever there is money. There are no real struggles. Today you have different struggles—Punjab, Assam, Telangana. The leaders are encouraging regionalism. For women—there are more rapes, more suicides. They have problems of education and unemployment. You cannot mobilize according to one plan. If one Party goes in one direction, the other goes in another. Economic programmes have become very important. People think in terms of what they will gain. Look at Indira Gandhi's 20-point programme. Some opportunists used it. We also supported some of them because we felt it would help solve some economic problems. While we went into the godowns

to fill the stomachs of the people, they are behaving as if the godowns and people's stomachs belong to them and are just exploiting the situation. That was a mistake. I say openly that I oppose it. Some of us are fighting against that policy. But we agreed to the majority opinion.

No, we did not discuss man-woman relations, but we never did anything without the Party's permission. We discussed economic problems and problems of life are related to that. It is difficult to say that all Party marriages were happy marriages. Some may have found their wives old-fashioned. Some may have had relations with others, or had relations before marriage.

But the Party never agreed to that. Only those who left their wives got permission to marry again from the Party. There was no possibility for those who still had wives. It was rare for women, if the husband was there, to go into the movement. It was different if they broke off relations, but if things were all right, no husband would give permission for his wife to join the movement.

As for the men who left their wives at home and joined the movement, it was only possible for them to develop relationships with other women in the movement if they broke off relations with their wives. Only after they stood the test did they get permission. There were not many comrades who had their wives. Of those who had, some died. Their wives were married again. That too only if they wanted it. There was no compulsion.

When men came into the Party without their wives—they did not have new relationships. No such thing happened in our group. Some of them are even today with their families—quite happy. If such problems came up or if there was no political commitment, they were not allowed to be in the dens, whether they were men or women. To lead that kind of life, underground life, one needs political consciousness. Is it possible for everyone to stay like that?

About Padma, it was like this. She wanted to marry one Chari. She had nice ideas. He was also from a nice family. Padma's parents did not agree. When they wanted her to marry someone else, the Party did not want to take the responsibility or take the blame. That boy also did not want to marry her. The Party said no to younger people—I know that. Padma then married someone else. Besides, she also did not really cry for Chari. To run away and marry, you must have another atmosphere. When the Party explained the matter to her she understood and listened. If she had

been insistent, she would not have married someone else.* Sometimes one oversteps a boundary knowingly or unknowingly. What is our responsibility then? We have to take the Party criticism (and not just parents'). Should we not abide by Party discipline? That is why it sometimes becomes necessary to prevent such things.

We in Mahila Sanghams do not think that women take drastic steps. If a woman has any problem, we bring her and give her all the help necessary. If there are problems, we try to bring husband and wife together, if he accuses her of infidelity, we don't accept it. If she says that she doesn't want to live with him and that he is not good, we do our best to bring them together. But what can we do ultimately? If she wants to leave, she can. Hasn't everyone a right to that? But if a woman makes a mistake, if she walks out without thinking, it is then very difficult to live in safety. It is wrong to act without thinking.

Our Mahila Sangham protects women in difficulty. Take Rameeza Bee. How much help we gave her. I went personally and told her we will help you, give you protection, will give you training. We even gave her some money. But she did not want to come.

Depending on her strength, a woman can stay alone without getting married. There are many now. My husband's sisters have not married. Nobody forced them. They are looked after well. They also mix very well with others. She (the sister) definitely did not want to marry she said.

There was nothing for women in the Andhra Maha Sabha. I used to go there sometimes. In Hyderabad Sangham, they were all maharanis. They never participated in our programmes or struggles. Except Arutla Kamala Devi and Nimmagadda Satyavathi. No one else came. No one came from Navjivan Mandal also—only a few of us: Pramila Tai, Yashoda Ben and myself.

About villages: I felt like going out there, but we were given programmes here. That is why we couldn't go. But afterwards, during elections and by-elections, we used to go sometimes. Those days we had work here in the dens—cooking for comrades and giving them medicines. Both men and women did this work.

In districts, there were Dalams and leaders. Here they used to

* See reference to this incident on pp 102–3.

give us training to protect ourselves from the Razakars. Weapons were given. We were taught how to use them, sometimes we did use them. There was no such thing as woman's work or man's work. We used to do everything together. We used to bring out pamphlets. I used to bring out circulars at the state level. There was no such thing as looking down on women in the Party. Our comrades do not have that feeling. No one forces us to do anything. When there were no women Dalam leaders then, why do you think there are not enough women in the leadership now? Take any class: if there is no general change in our society, if there is change only in a small section, how can women come into leadership? Even in Telangana—in one corner—among so many, how many leaders do you think have come? They must have opportunities, they must absorb political experience. That is, they need education, practical experience.

Look, my daughter is a doctor. She was active politically. But after marriage that boy has no politics, leave alone sympathy for our Party. After marriage, she is not able to work freely. Once these girls who are political marry boys who are not political, it is very difficult for them. That is one's nature. Besides, after she finished her medicine, she has developed a middle-class mentality—to live comfortably like others. Why blame him? It is her fault also. She can do a little . . . other than to work and look after children. My daughter-in-law is not in the Party. She is a singer. My son is a doctor. He is in Delhi. The younger one is in a bank, he sometimes fights for fourth-class employees.

Gour Saab never complains that I have not done something. My husband never interferes in my affairs. I also don't interfere in his affairs. We share all the work. Sometimes when I have more work, he says, 'don't bother, we will get some food from the hotel, you look after your work.' When I am not there, he gets something for the children. If there are any problems—that is, political ones—we discuss them. Not differences. Don't we have to discuss sometimes? Something I like, he doesn't like, for example, the 20-Point Programme. Sometimes I do things I don't like and I feel it is wrong. Then I argue. When I talk or ask him, I ask him like a member of the Central Committee. He also replies in that capacity. (Sometimes I ask things I do not know).

Chakilam Lalithamma

We come from a middle class family—a Brahmin family. The village was Kothapalli, now in Tungathurthi Taluka. It was the Nizam's time so the custom of *gosha* or purdah was there. We were known as the *deshmukh-deshpande* families. Every year we were given a few hundreds or thousands of rupees as tax by the peasants. Later that would be divided into shares. This had been the custom for generations. We women never went out of the house. I was just five years old when I was married. It was a child marrige. I remember a little of those times, but I've forgotten many things. I matured at eleven. They performed some rituals, some *shanti* (propitiatory rights), those were traditional times. I used to visit my mother-in-law's house now and then. He [the husband] was about twelve or thirteen years old then. During the first two visits, my mother accompanied me. She used to stay for ten or fifteen days, and go back. My mother and mother-in-law were first cousins. They used to perform various rituals together. He was studying at the time. In those days there was a school which went up till the 7th class for men. I don't know about a girl's school. My father set up a school in a cowshed in front of the house, engaged a teacher and got us all educated. Later the *sahucars* and the richer peasants sent their children to the school. We studied in that school upto the fourth class. The medium was Urdu till the third class.

By then my husband had left the school and became politically active. He started taking part in struggles and in Gandhiji's movements. The Arya Samaj was a strong influence in those days. I was about twelve years old when we began to live together as man and wife. Since we had been visiting each other earlier and our people were also related, adjusting to the family was quite easy for me. My sister-in-law also had a child-marriage. So I didn't feel very scared of them or anything like that. But to look at a man and go near him was a bit scary at first. However, I had no mother-in-law problems.

The Communist Party was working secretly then. Devulapalli Venkateshwara Rao was my husband's cousin. He told us about the Party, about the literature and so on. He felt that I also should be brought in to work for society. Venkateshwara Rao was in jail. He used to translate a lot of material from English to Telugu so that we could be involved. He taught us about the world through maps and translated Nehru's letters for us. I had given up my studies then. I couldn't manage it with all the visits to my mother-in-law's house! We too began to read, translate, and draw maps then. The Nizam had banned all institutions. There was a magazine called *Kagada* and we used to read the articles in it—we women. We didn't have any strong opinions then. We were so young, after all, just twelve years. My brothers used to read Chalam and Bhatti Vikramarka's books and we also devoured everything. I became very interested in Hindi, then in the Andhra Maha Sabha and the Mahila Maha Sabha. I got acquainted with Rangamma and Venkatarama Reddy. I used to attend the Mahasabhas in those days. I was encouraged by my brother and my husband. So I could go without caring about what anyone said. My father and mother also asked why women had to go for these things. But I said I went following his [the husband's] interests. I was full of affection because he was my husband. After all, all said and done, it was there, the belief that the husband was all in all. My sisters-in-law used to read devotional stories, stories about *pativrata* (devotion to the husband) women like Savitri and Sati Anasuya and follow their example. Even though we were very young we did all this because we believed in it.

Later we organized meetings with 20–30 women where we read magazines etc. We read stories from Russian literature, as well as Veereshalingam, Subhas Chandra Bose, etc. I couldn't understand much from the paper then. My husband used to explain everything in detail. His help and support made it possible for me to do all this. It was about this time that I became a member of the Steering Committee. I was the only one in Nalgonda Jilla. We used to call the people who lived around there for meetings. Gandhiji's influence was very strong in those days. There were *charkas* in each house. In the beginning it was mostly people from the middle class who came to these meetings. Initially, the struggle was against the Nizam and the zamindari system. It later came to be the Communist Party struggle. The peasants used to give the

zamindars grain—so much per acre. The peasants suffered because of this as the yield per acre was not much in those areas. This is how the movement started. By then the Communist Party had not yet separated from the Andhra Maha Sabha. That name was still kept secret and we worked under the Andhra Maha Sabha banner.

My mother and father-in-law didn't object to our moving out to live separately in Suryapet. My father-in-law had acquired 800 acres of land. But the financial condition had begun to deteriorate. Unable to pay the taxes, some peasants used to hand over their land and migrate. The better off and the village officials just used to take over such land. Everyone did this in those days. My father-in-law had also acquired a lot of land from peasants who had left in distress.

My father-in-law acquired a lot of property like this. But some people who were resentful of it brought the peasants whose land he had acquired back and tried to take the land. They turned against him and the harvest was ruined and so was the cultivation. Finally he was left with only fifteen to twenty ploughs, eighty acres of dry land and forty acres of wet land. My husband and his brother were still studying. It became difficult even to get enough to eat. They didn't work the land themselves but leased it out and depended on the grain that the peasants gave them. They had become quite old then. In such conditions what would happen to the family if we got involved in the struggle? My parents–in-law were worried. Then my husband assured them that he would take revenge on the men who had turned against them, that's why he was going into the struggle. And he did so.

We started moving around even more from about 1942 or '43. That is when we got our training in Vijayawada. Savithramma, Chandra Rajeswar Rao, and Moturi Udayam gave us our training. They trained us in self defence. They also told us what to do when there is bombing, or houses on fire etc. We learnt to bind our saris tightly around us. I was there for two months—I was the first one to join. Swarajyam had not joined yet.

I was taken then so that these people, Sasirekha and Swarajyam would gain courage from my presence. They were all there. We all read the papers together and stayed together doing various things. There was a lot of difference betwen our food and theirs. They used to say that I had petit bourgeois tendencies. We were landlords and

deshmukhs. Not that they were from any really backward conditions. But I used to just adjust because of the feeling that we should all be one. Because of their Arya Samaj background, Sasirekha used to speak in Hindi. We learnt to swim, learnt Hindi and used to read the paper secretly. Some time passed in this way. We would bring the women together, hold meetings etc. Women came in large numbers to the public meetings. We brought them together like this: we used to sing a lot of songs—songs of the freedom movement, then songs of the struggle against the Nizam, songs of women's rights etc. We used to write petitions demanding rights for women, property rights, freedom of speech. We demanded that child marriages should be abolished and widow remarriages allowed. We collected signatures and filed petitions about all this. Many people supported this but they didn't come with us. They would attend meetings and listen to the whole proceedings, but they wouldn't talk much. But they would listen when we talked. They would say, 'why do you worry about these things? You are so young, why do you invite these needless problems,' and so on. 'If you talk like this, then how will change come?' I used to ask. Our people are there in other places too. Then we would read out literature about the Russian Revolution. We used to read the book *Mother*. My sisters-in-law used to come there. They were all quite supportive. Only my father and mother were against it all. We used to mingle with everyone and eat together. So we were excommunicated. At home they used to serve my food outside. I never ate there and stopped visiting them as well. My husband said, 'no, we won't go there', so we didn't go anywhere for two years. Then my son was born . . . my husband was in jail. . . I was forced to go to my parents, there was no other way. I was fourteen or fifteen years old. That child died when he was only four months old. It was after all this that my husband was released from jail. Earlier on my mother and the rest wanted me to go through a *prayaschittam* (purification rite). Otherwise they said that everything was finished between us. This meant they would heat a golden wire and burn my inner tongue (uvula). That would purify me. . . he was in jail and I had no support or help . . . they said that if I didn't agree to go through with it they would both die. Maybe it wouldn't have happened if he was there. So I went through with it. No, it wasn't too bad. They heat it a little and touch the tip of the uvula. So I gave in to my father's request and went through with it. Later

when I told my husband about it, he was very angry. He refused to send me home for quite some time. By this time my sister died and they suffered quite a bit. Because of their suffering I had to give in to them. I was sixteen years old then. I had an aunt. She had no daughters and so she had adopted my sister. That sister died. When her son was getting married, she invited us to the wedding and we went, though unwillingly. We told her that since we were excommunicated no one would be willing to eat with us. But they insisted on our coming and said that they would see that we ate along with the whole group. So we took the child and went. They served the feast. He sat down with the group of men. Immediately the priests said that they would not eat since he was sitting there and they rose and left. I was there with a twenty-one day old child. They had asked me to eat earlier. I suspected something was wrong and refused to eat. They insisted that since I was newly delivered, I should eat early for my health. They found it very hard to cover up the situation. I insisted stubbornly that I would eat only with the others. They would not eat with me. They wore ritually pure clothes, closed the doors and ate secretly. I lost my temper. I thought, 'so you are eating without even feeding me!' My aunt had high blood pressure and she got palpitations and collapsed. I left with my husband. It was twelve midnight when we reached home. We never entered their house after that. A lot of things like this happened then.

Although I was young I took all the responsibility here—in the Party. The cooking and serving of meals were all my responsibility. Swarajyam and the others used to help a little but the chief responsibility was mine. They were not so interested in the work. The men would often say, 'Look, Lalitha is working alone, you should help her.' But I never created prolems or compared the share of work done. I was an example to all of them. Swarajyam and the others called me *Akka* [elder sister] and were very respectful to me. Since I came from a traditionally cultured family my word was always final on many things. I taught them how to behave with men, how to wear the sari over their shoulders and so on. At a glance from me they would draw their saris properly over their breasts. I never said anything much to anyone. I just used to work as long as my patience lasted. We used to cook in mud pots as the Party didn't give us any pots or pans. Fetching the foodstuff for cooking, shifting houses—we did all this. There were always ten or

fifteen people there. Pratap Reddu, Narasimha Reddy, Yadagiri Rao, all of them were there. The men never helped in these chores. BN's wife Saroja used to help a lot them. She mixed easily with us. She was a widow before she married BN. Another woman, the wife of one Miryalaguda Venkateswar Rao, also helped. I never used to compete with anyone. It was the men who chided the other women for not doing enough!

Later, once the child was six months old, I was with my mother near old Suryapet. The struggle was very intense there in Balam and old Suryapet. The struggle was going on and so I decided to stay with my mother rather than with my mother-in-law. Then he sent me a message saying that he was going far away: 'The struggle is very intense, you must come with me, there will be arrests and so on. So harness a cart and come to the next village which is two miles away and I'll meet you there,' it said. My brother was much younger than me. He carried the letter. He did not tell my parents. I told my mother and others. There was a big scene then. I said I was married and that my husband was the one who mattered; it was he who was taking care of me. They couldn't argue any further and gave me a cart. I left in the might with the child. When I reached Gattupalli, the village was surrounded by the police. He was the leader of the movement in old Suryapet. A lot of them were going with sticks and axes. I thought I'd leave my daughter in one of the houses and go alone. But they said, 'no, don't!' They had shot a few people dead there. Some thousands of people had gathered there. We had sticks and slings. No other weapons. When two were shot dead the rest moved back, retreating in fear. They also surrounded the hills where he was hiding. He managed to escape somehow. We went to another village. We always stayed in the houses of poor peasants. I couldn't eat the gruel that they served us. They would cook a gruel quite different from ours that had a strong sourish smell and I just couldn't swallow it. It was neither eating nor starving and sometimes I would just get to drink some buttermilk. Later we walked through two villages. I couldn't carry the baby and walk so I gave her to another man and kept walking. It was very difficult even in that village. The police would catch everyone who they suspected of being communist and beat them up. They humiliated the women. We wanted to reach Kothagudem—B N's village. My husband had not yet joined us. In Kothagudem, B N Pratap Reddy, Narasimha Reddy, Swarajyam

and others were all there. On the way I got separated from the others. The police raided that spot also. I was in a blacksmith's house. They began to get scared. They said that if I stayed any longer they would be finished, and asked me to leave. How could I go? I was alone with a small child. It was hard even to walk. I couldn't even walk well in those days. Even though I had come into the movement, I came from a family where the women stayed indoors. That was the first time I stepped out like this. They sent a small boy to escort me. We left at 9.00 a.m. in the morning. No food, nothing. We reached another village called Gollampalli and we reached a hut outside near the fields. There was a well and few sheds for cattle. I wore the kind of coarse sari that peasant women wear. There we ran into the police. They asked where I was going. I said my brother had come and I was going to Panasanapalli. They didn't quite believe me. I was very young. They suspected my appearance—but for some reason they just let me go. Later, I stayed with a farmer till about 8 o'clock.

I asked him to provide me with a bullock cart as I had to go to Narasimha Reddy's house in Kothagudem. I said I would pay the hire. I had no money on me . . . I was just sure that someone would pay once we got there . . . . But he couldn't harness a cart, he offered to accompany me anywhere I wanted to go. The corn fields were tall with corn and it was dark then. The child was six months. The dew was falling off the leaves and our clothes kept getting wet. I just carried the child, threw a sheet over my shoulder and walked. It was dark and we lost our way. We walked through the night and finally reached the village called Sangam at dawn. All the folks there were scared. We didn't meet anyone there. We asked the way to Kothagudem and they told us. The man who came with me left me there and asked me to go (on my own) wherever I wanted to go. He went away. I went alone. I was frightened. By the time we reached the outskirts of Kothagudem the *deshmukh's* men were there. They were watching—guarding the place. We hid in one hut and sent a boy to Narasimha Reddy's house. Sasirekha's mother-in-law came to fetch me. We had to cross the fences and go. There was a kind of bush that we had to jump over. The old woman was very angry. She said, 'Why do these people get into these movements instead of staying in their houses. To add to it they have small children who suffer.' No sleep yesterday—no food the whole night. It took two hours to reach his house. Then I had a bath and

she bathed the child and asked me to feed the child—still angrily. She comforted the child and served my meal. Narasimha Reddy was not there—he had gone to the village called Kukadem. There the whole village was one, united. The enemies were few. Only the *patwari*, the *patel* and one or two rich peasants were there who were on the government's side. By then the movement had intensified. They decided that we should go to Vijayawada Parganas and sent us off there. We never stayed still because we were women. Since there were common kitchens, I used to cook there. I used to work in the hospital under Ramdas. I used to help perform operations, give medicines, give first aid, help in deliveries and so on. After some days there was a warrant out for me. Ramdas came and told me about it. Then in the night, Ramdas, I and another comrade went to another village. The village was called Kokkireni. My mother-in-law and others, unable to bear the raids, had moved to a village called Narasimhapuram. I was interested in handing over my daughter to my mother-in-law so that I could take part in the movement. We didn't do much in the struggle. When we went to the village the squad members did all the work. We didn't say anything. They only taught us about self defence but never expected or allowed us to go with the squads and take part in raids. They felt that it would be a nuisance if the women fell behind or got caught and so didn't let us go along.

At about this time the Party decided that the Telangana Movement should be publicised in Andhra and made known to the people there. So Swarajyam, Sasirekha, and I, who were capable of talking were selected to go. I couldn't go, because of the child. I wanted to wean the child from my milk. She developed rickets. When she took ill we felt it was no use keeping her here so I took her to Vijayawada. We stayed there for five or six months. Acchamamba and others looked after us with a lot of affection. There was the feeling that we were from Telangana and we were carrying on the movement. I couldn't address any meetings, or do any other work then, because of the child's ill health. But even Devulapalli and others said, 'look after the child. You will have done everything if you look after that child.' Narasimha Reddy's son was the same age as my daughter. He had just got the very same illness and he died. So we felt that we had to save the children at any cost!

Then we went to Manikota Taluka in Warangal Jilla. We were

there for a month or two. After that we went into the forest. Ramdas was also with us. He used to give first-aid and medicines there also. There were a lot of raids by the police. Once, I don't remember very clearly—it was in Narasingagudem—we held a meeting just to give courage to the people. The Razakars had moved into these areas and the police and military raids had increased there. So we held the meeting. We never slept in the place where we held a meeting. All of them went to the hillock and slept there. The police surrounded that hillock. They came into the village and gathered the people together. They asked for Thirumala Rao—but although he was there, the villagers didn't tell them. He was dressed like a farm labourer. Later he went to a Christian's house and hid there and escaped. The Christian even swore on Christ, when the police insisted, that there was no one there. Thirumala Rao was in the attic. Once there was a raid on the village of Ellampeta when we were there. Sasirekha and I were the only women. There was a comrade from Bombay: Venkateswara Rao; Rajeswar Rao and all the leaders were there. We were leaving that village. All the weapons were with us. Sten guns, machine guns—all. The police surrounded the village. They couldn't come to the undergrowth where we were hiding. We escaped, climbed the hillock and left the place. I had a high fever. I had given my baby to someone and walked all the way with them. My husband asked me to sit in a bullock cart but I wouldn't listen. I was scared that if the police caught up—they would all escape and I alone would get caught. They might trouble me and insult me. I was scared, so I decided to walk with the others though I was so feverish.

After this I stayed with a farmer's family in Khammam Jilla. The neighbours suspected something. I walked from another village to Tirumalayapalem in Khammam Jilla—when a man saw me with the child, and reported it to the police. He said that I was so and so, a leader, and the police came and arrested me in the morning. I had taught my baby to give the *lal salam* (red salute) to everyone! When the police came she probably thought that since they were in khaki, they were all comrades and greeted them with a *lal salam*. She came in and said that the uncles have come, they want to meet you. Now what was there to do? I said I was visiting a relative and they suspected me of being the wrong person. I tried to escape that way, but they said they had checked on everything and come. So I was arrested. But they did not behave brutally with me. They

questioned me, asked for my name, my husband's name, his whereabouts and so on. I didn't answer them. I told them that I was the wife of a squad member and gave some name. They didn't believe me. They said I was lying. They asked me what jobs I had done, the details. 'You are working with the women. Do you know who Thirumala Rao's wife is?' they kept asking. Finally they said I was Thirumala Rao's wife. I was alone there and I was quite frightened. They gave me a cot. A police inspector asked me to go into the room and then talk. I refused and said I would rather stay there. I kept sitting there with the child in my lap. They said, 'Why are you so scared lady? We also have sisters, don't be so frightened!' One policeman told me that the Inspector was very cruel, a bad man. I had only one thought—the first chance I got I would escape! I hoped to see someone. The only problem was the child. What would they do to her if I left her and escaped? Running away with her was out of question. I couldn't escape carrying her. When the police made me walk from one village to another I looked out to see whether I could see any squad member on the way, or hear a gunshot somewhere. But nothing like that happened. They took me in a cart till the road then put me in a van to take me to Khammam. The police were all talking, saying Arutla Kamala and Lalitha were arrested. They kept me in a room in Khammam police station. Thousands of people flooded the police station to see me. But the police would chase them away. They wouldn't even let me open the window and look out. The child used to sit outside. There was an Inspector there, from Andhra. He said that some of his people were also in the Communist Party. But here in Telangana they were cutting their throats. So he tried to persuade me nicely to tell him everything I knew. I said I didn't know anything. Then he said, 'why don't you write a letter to your husband and give it to me?' I refused to do so. There was one man there who was probably a DSP. He said, 'bring that one into the room.' There, in front of us, they were thrashing one of the men who had given us shelter. I objected, saying that such language was not decent, that he should refer to me properly. I was only seventeen but I really had that courage then. 'How do you expect me to talk to you?' he asked. I said, 'be a little more respectful.' Then they said that they would take us to a cavalry mounted police outpost there. We should point out all the secret hideouts and dens to them. I was really frightened when it was time to leave that night. I didn't

know where they would take us, or what they would do to me. They said there was an order asking that I should be taken to some place; but they said that they wouldn't send me anywhere until I let out all the secrets. Then I said that the secrets are available only to a few, and not to everyone else. They sent me to Warangal Jail. Even in the train I was the only woman. The other people who gave shelter to us had also been arrested and were in the compartment. We all joined together and shouted slogans. People used to stare at us in surprise. Earlier the rule was that if one was sent to jail, the black wedding beads (the *mangalasutra*) and toe rings were all removed. I had my *mangalasutra* on my neck. They asked me to remove it, saying it was the custom in jail. I refused to do so. Then I thought that after all the Communist Party holds nothing wrong about such things—so I gave it to them. Later I came to know that these conditions did not apply to political prisoners. The food in the jail was *roti, dal* in a mud pot, rice that was full of mud and gruel. I found it very difficult to eat that rice. One lady used to guard us. She kept asking me when I had last had my menses. I used to say that there was no pattern, that sometimes I'd get it once a month, sometimes once in two. Living in the forests constantly, and not having enough food—my periods were not regular. When I didn't get my period for two months she spread a rumour that I was pregnant. They gave me some milk and a quarter-seer of rice. I would feed the child milk, then put some in the rice and eat it up. Once in a way I would ask for some chilli for the *roti*, put some coconut oil in it and then eat it up. Even that was quite difficult for me to eat.

Later we decided to start a protest about the food in jail. There was a man called Yadav Reddy. He is probably the Principal in the University now. He sent word to us, asking us to start a protest about food. Some of the policemen used to secretly support us, bring us our letters. We said we would fast. The authorities said, 'go ahead—are you threatening us?' There was a woman called Tirupathamma with me. She used to live in Ravi Narayana Reddy's house. They arrested her for feeding communist leaders. Her daughter was about seventeen years old. She was called Viplava Kumari. Both were in jail. She used to sing well. Along with them Sasirekha and I all together started a struggle for better food. In the beginning they ignored us. Once they brought food as usual. We refused to take it and crossed the gate. They came and

blocked our way. I went ahead, 'don't touch us—we are women. If you lay a hand on us it is not correct,' I said. Everyone came out. When those who had eaten were washing their plates, we called out 'Jai to the CP.' The whole jail resounded with the call. We, Sasirekha, Viplava Kumari and I, were the ones who stepped forward. Then they said—we'll give you whatever you want. We said 'give us rice, we will cook it ourselves.' They gave us good rice that day. They did it for two days. Then they were scared that we might continue these protests. They told us we had visitors, took us to the van and transferred us to Nanded Jail. We protested there also. They didn't give us medicines when the children were ill. My child was ill. Even Sasirekaha's daughter, Sumati, was ill. She kept getting fever, loose motions, and then the fever would go down and come again. She was two months older than my daughter. We demanded the opportunity to study, sit for examinations. We asked for a library, newspapers, the choice to visit relatives etc. The men used to send us letters asking us to struggle for these demands. I took the lead in agitating for these demands. I was an extremist! Once they cooked cauliflower leaves for us. I picked it up and threw it in their faces and they noticed that and went away! From there they sent us to Aurangabad. We were there for a year. We fasted for fifteen days there also. Them my BP went up and I started getting palpitations. It was always some struggle or the other. Later, we were brought to Hyderabad. I was in jail for three years then. After the police action, I was arrested in November 1948 and was released during the elections in 1951. They placed a condition that I shouldn't leave Suryapet. My daughter was six years old then. Again, in Hyderabad, I lived underground for some years. My sons were born then, the first in 1953 and the other in 1955. We had an operation then not to have any more children. Earlier we had used a kind of contraceptive paste. Many others used it too, but we didn't discuss it all that much.

During the next General Elections my husband contested. Yadav Reddy, Narasimha Reddy and others protested and resigned from the Party. He was the one who actually brought them into the struggle. Later I had no Party—I just stayed at home. There was some whispering about me then, but when I told him, my husband said, don't worry, what do we lose? After all I trust you completely. No one in the Party ever behaved badly. There was the Party discipline and the punishment if that discipline was

violated—like being expelled. So there was no irresponsible behaviour on anyone's part.

In 1961 I contested against Swarajyam. The Congress Party asked me to contest although I was not a member of the Congress Party. Nor did I give up my membership of the Communist Party. I agreed to contest only because of their pressure and my husband's insistence—not that I felt it was the *correct* thing to do, but out of the need to do *something*. After all, earlier I had wandered around and worked in the struggles and the Mahila Mandal in various capacities. I was unable to sit quiet and I gave in to that pressure. . .

Some time later, my husband, Narasimha Reddy and Venkat Reddy were implicated in a murder case and arrested. He was in jail for a year. When he came out we didn't even have roof over our heads! The Razakars smashed up the house, pulled down things and set fire to it! My mother-in-law and others had come to live with us. My brother-in-law went away to work elsewhere and the whole reponsibility for the family fell on us.

We built ourselves a house later. We had no property nor did he have any great desire to acquire any. We had three children. We had to do something but I had no qualification. I took the seventh class examinations, took the Hindi examinations and became a teacher in the Jilla Parishad School. I took the Visharada examination, then went to Bombay to give the Bhasharatna, and later took the Bhushan examination in Hyderabad. Now I am a Hindi pandit. It was all my own effort. I never went to school or college regularly or had any teacher. I just studied on my own. I have been teaching in this school ever since. . .

Pesara Sattemma

The village where I was born is called Addaguduru. And my father he came into that. . . that Communist Party. He became a communist because they were causing hardship to the people, forcing the men to perform *vetti*, forcing women to perform *vetti*; if this trouble was to go from us, if the government had to go, then all of us had to unite, to fight—and that was the communist way, according to my father. Then they came—the police. They came for him and they surrounded the village; looked all over, searched for him. When they heard the police were coming, all his friends who had come—all of them—left the village. They went out and stood at some distance. They had slings and stones. The military had guns. These people were throwing stones and the military were pointing their guns at them. Then it was over. Each week they would come and search the house to see if he was there. The police would come with the *patel's* watchman and at any hour of the night they would search the whole house. My father left the house out of fear of being found like this. When he entered the village they posted a sentry to warn them that the police were coming. They would look over the whole house and threaten my mother saying they would beat her. My mother also often ran away from home.

I was about sixteen then. My father's name was Parakala Malla Reddy. When he disappeared they would threaten my mother—'I'll do this to you or I'll do that to you', they would say. 'Where did you drive the man? Why are you at home' and so she would also jump over the wall and run away when she heard they were coming.

There were some rowdies in the village. They would come with the police and knock at the doors all night asking if he was there. They would come with the *amin* (inspector). When my mother fled she went to her mother's village, Irasanigudem. I went to my mother-in-law's house. They (her family) were two brothers and a

sister—my mother would take all of them when she ran away to her mother's village. After she left—my father was also not in the house—they came and set fire to the house. And then my father would explain to us that it was all right if the house was destroyed as long as the people were safe. Even my husband's village was set on fire. Since it was so disturbed here we went to Pullayagudem. My father came to our house there once. It was hard to stay in that village—such trouble there. Again and again the military kept coming. The village was searched. So he knew he had to go. He told everyone in the village, collected some money from them and wanted to go far away. He just walked out of the village and then the horses came; the ones who were watching cried out that the horsemen had come. My father was going away. They caught some men in the village and beat them up. So they said—the bastards—that we are not the ones; there he goes—that is Parakala Malla Reddy—catch him. The horsemen chased him then. My father's companion was Somi Reddy Rami Reddy. They were very close, always together. Both of them were running and both were caught and brought back. They were tied, both to the same tree, and shot dead. I was not there. My mother and brothers were not there either. They tied them to a *tumma* (thorny bush) tree. He said that he would give them the money he had collected, he would give them the cart and oxen—if only they would let him go. They took the money. Then they covered their faces and shot them with one shot. Then they dug a grave—maybe they had some life still in them—and threw them there and left. It was only later that we came to know that he died this way. A man came and told us. The tenth day funeral rites were performed. Even on the tenth day, on hearing that the police were coming, the people who had come for the rites all went away and hid. They [the police] thought his wife would come and so they should catch her. So with all these troubles the people hid in fear. Our life was like that—trouble ridden- . . . they burnt our house down. Call him the landlord or call him the village scribe—they wanted to ruin our crops. They threw the engine into a well, let the cattle loose on the fields that we had planted with such care. All the labourers just disappeared—not one was left—for fear of being beaten. They had many troubles. They are still loyal to the communists.

We had to do *vetti* in those days. The landlord got it done, the village officials got it done. Chilli was pounded; grain was

pounded; the *madigas* had to stay in front of the big house to guard it. My father used to say that we shouldn't do this kind of work. We had about ten acres of land to cultivate. After my father went away, my mother used to mind the land. My mother—Ramanarasamma—suffered many hardships. Everyone in the village—everyone in the country—got some money when someone in the family died in the struggle, but the *dora* saw to it that we didn't get any. We were small children then. Because of my father, my brother was also put in jail. He was in jail for six months. Who shot my father? It was the Union Armies. Not the Razakars. That was the Union Army. After all the Razakars and the Union Army all did the same thing. The Union got its work done through the Razakars.

They surrounded even my husband's village because my father used to visit us now and then. There was no one there who was working in the Party. They came for my father. The police *patel* and the *malipatel* thought that my father had made his village go communist and he might do the same here, teach them the same. So they plotted to catch him. They gave a report and quietly pointed out where he was. Then the police came and surrounded the village. One here and one there like pillars. He will have to come out from somewhere they felt. My father was not in the village then. He used to stay outside and have a meal sent out to him. He would send word secretly and we would send him tiffin. There were seven or eight raids they felt that because his daughter was there and his aunt he would certainly come to them. They must be feeding him. But they could not catch him there. They couldn't catch him anywhere. In the end he was caught in his own village.

Still we felt like doing something. We would fetch branches, build huts in the yard, keep the men, nearly ten, who came for him and cook and feed them there. The communist workers and other leaders from outside used to come there. We had to hide them, cook food for them, make curry in a huge pot, carry it to them secretly when no one was looking and feed them. We used to hide them very carefully.

We wanted to do these things. We kept chilli powder ready. If anyone came we would fling it on them. 'The police will come suddenly,' my father used to teach this in the village. That whole village became communist. And because the village had turned

communist the police raids on the village increased. If they found any woman alone they would trouble her. Because they kept coming like that, at dusk all the women would gather in some house where there were small babies and old people. The women would get together and sleep there. They came and banged and banged on the door. We shivered and our hearts fluttered in fright because they had come. When we opened the door they said, 'there are so many of you here. You whores, were all of you born to that one fellow? What do you mean he's your father? Did that one fellow father the whole bunch of you? Whores!' Then they would get the women out and lathi charge them, saying 'go back to your houses.' The blows rained down on us. Even then we stayed together in groups because we were scared of what they would do if we went alone. Once they took away whatever they found on us—whether it was black beads or a bit of gold. They snatched it all away. Another time they set fire to all the houses: snatched away whatever was there; and pulled all the thatch down. They took away whatever was on the women. They turned everything else upside down. Our hearts were quaking in fear. We would all run out of the village and gather in groups, ten here, ten there, twenty there. Maybe they will take this away or take that away. . . Even if we were tempted to go and look, how could we go into these houses—if they caught us we would be ruined. So we just stayed away. Only after they had all gone away would we get back into the village. Those were hard days indeed. Everyone who joined the communists was marked and the police told. They beat us up. They would find out who was feeding them and come and thrash them. Still we would feed them secretly and carefully.

In every village about twenty young men would get together and form a squad. They would get weapons ready. If they got hold of a policeman alone in the police station they would kill him and take weapons. Those guns would be with the squad. The minute the police had left they would come back . . . we would cook for them . . . we would cook for all of them . . . from that day in this house we've cooked for all of them—cooked and cooked . . . because someone might come or go, we'd cook in a hurry . . . . Then we'd go out and remain under some trees.

Once the *karanam* of this village, the *patel* and the watchman went to Motkur and gave a report to the police. They were returning in a bullock-cart. About ten men from our village went

there. The villagers thrashed them black and blue and came away—they bashed them to a pulp. Then they went and got treated. After that they calmed down, were peaceful and didn't show any anger.

There was a woman in Pullayagudem whose name was Satyamma. Now she is dead. Her husband was dead then. She lived with her mother. Once, when the police came—she had three sisters-in-law—they pulled at their hands. She pushed them aside. She came in the way and stood in front. So they pulled her hand. She had a broomstick in her hand. She laid it across their backs a few times and then ran out. She had only one eye. So they kept coming back and looking for her saying, 'where is that blind woman? Where?' But they didn't get her. She escaped.

Another time when the police came, they kept asking where is Parakala Malla Reddy's daughter, and searched everywhere. I was hiding behind that wall. Some of the toddy tappers there made me sit hidden from view. It seems they pointed to one woman and said she was the one. She cried out that she wasn't and ran away. I was trembling. My whole body was shaking. Someone might point me out to them. There were so many troubles like that. Troubles one can't describe.

Once we went to my mother's village. It was the Ugadi festival. We were eating our meal when someone cried out that the police had come. We just left everything and ran out. Everyone in the village ran out. We left behind the rice and the sweets—it was Ugadi—and just ran out of the village. But no one came then. There was a lot of anger. We all cursed, saying, 'who is that bastard who said the police had come,' and went back to our uneaten food.

In all that trouble, who could look after whom? Each one looked out for his own life . . . the mother-in-law couldn't look after the daughter-in-law or the daughter-in-law after the mother-in-law. In those days we cooked with castor oil. They broke all the eggs—poured castor oil over them and set fire to them. There were wooden boxes in which the clothes were kept . . . the police opened the boxes, threw all the clothes into the fire . . . they smashed all the pots . . . took away all the oil, eggs and brass pots. They used to come into the houses on their horses. They rode in through the big door right into the houses.

The struggle was for land. In my mother's village, there were five hundred acres of land. Black soil. It was Government land. My

father carried on the struggle for that land. It was lying fallow from the beginning. Why should the poor be without land? Why should it lie barren? So they began to cut down the trees and started working. The military came. Before that struggle could get anywhere, my father died. Later my brother carried on. Then there were seven or eight raids and they took my brother away and beat him up. People from nearly twenty villages around would come together and cut the trees. They kept fighting for twenty to thirty years, they fought for that land . . . . They got tired fighting like this. . . . Lives were lost, houses were burnt, people got beaten up—there were so many blows. People grew weary after this long struggle. Now the land . . . five hundred acres has been distributed. For these people . . . scheduled castes . . . all the poor got a small piece each. The government didn't take it. They may not have given them *pattas* (official allotment papers).

Can you imagine how they beat us after the Union came? Before the Union Army came, they said that the Muslims would just butcher us. But what big things did the Union Army do? My brother was a thin fellow—he had led a lean life. They dragged him out and beat him up. Oh Lord! you should have seen those Sikhs—damn them! The Union Army those days was full of Sikhs. When they were beating my brother, the village folk were upset. They cried out help, oh help. What is wrong with these people. They killed the father. They looted the property. And they are beating up the son now! They took him away to jail and so today he gets a pension of Rs 300 a month. That is a blessing—that's all.

Once the Union Army came in a lorry. They rounded up everyone in the village and thrashed them. Every single person they saw. Although the people must have thought this, no one dared ask them why they were beating up the people whom they had come to help; the very same people who had suffered so much all these days. . . no one said anything. . . they just bore the blows in silence.

Did women come from these villages to work in the squads? No, they didn't go in large numbers. Someone somewhere might have come. The leader's wives went but the others didn't go.

My mother is old now. She can't see very well. She has nothing. She feels she has suffered so much and she has nothing.

As for me, I have two daughters and two sons. One daughter is in town. Her husband is a typist. The other daughter is in

Nalgonda. Her husband is a teacher. The boys are studying. My legs. . . see—they are paralysed and I can't walk anywhere. I tried so many things, showed many people, took medicines, even got operated but nothing has worked. Now my walking, my world, everything has gone limp. It is three years now. . . everything has to be done for me as if I am a small child. . . .

Mallu Swarajyam

Ours was a family of landlords. Even the landlords those days liked imitating the *jagirdars* and the big landlords. There was also the ambition to become 'bigger' than them. Becoming bigger meant more prestige, more authority. In the Nizam's kingdom people vied with each other to earn more respect and authority. I did not see the complexities so clearly then.

By then my father had died. When the Andhra Maha Sabha struggle started I was exactly eleven years old. My brother was studying in the tenth class. He was studying in Nalgonda. The freedom struggle was on then. He was strongly influenced by that struggle. He felt that we should form a Sangham and start a struggle like that, chiefly against the Nizam. The Muslim rulers were dominating us. The Telugu language and culture were being destroyed.

'There is the Andhra Maha Sabha. We must join that. We must break the dominance of the landlords over the people. We must liberate the people,' he used to say to us. Why were women drawn in? In the Andhra Maha Sabha there was a struggle against the custom of keeping women in purdah. That purdah—it was like this: when the bangle sellers came, my mother would push her hands from under a curtain and have the bangles fitted on her hands—even the bangle seller wasn't permitted to see her face! Why! the washerwoman—even though a woman—could not see my mother. When my mother was newly-married, if she had work with the washerwoman she had to fix a certain time but couldn't see her whenever she pleased. There was a cook who prepared the food. So they started a campaign saying that it was not right to keep women in purdah, not right to keep them in ignorance. That was one of the things they said. Quite apart from all this, when I was young my brother, together with my father, taught us to swim, ride horses, and fence with swords. They even used to send the women from landlord's houses to the *Gurukula* school in

Hyderabad. So, although women were very oppressed in many ways, some families did send their women out like this. This was mainly because if the men were not available in times of need, or died suddenly, then the women should be capable of handling the *zamindari*. So they would give them a little training and teach them to read and write. My father engaged a tutor and taught us at home. My sister was studying in the fifth class. I was studying in the third or fourth class then. The main reason why politics found some place in our house was probably because my mother was a very gentle person. If you are not strict it is very difficult to exert authority or dominate. The rest of the people led the lives of slaves. All kinds of people would come and work and go. The landlord's fields had to be sowed and planted first. If they were in trouble they would beg, saying. 'Mother I touch your feet, I am your slave. . .' But they could not claim anything as a right. My mother always pitied their plight. 'See how much work we get from them,' she would say. But when we spoke of dominance, slavery and exploitation she would listen silently and not answer. She was unable to oppose us.

In those days my brother-in-law was deeply influenced by the freedom struggle. He used to talk to us about the freedom struggle all the time. That's how politics started at home. When I was eleven my brother sent me to Vijayawada. It was 1943, I think. They were holding classes there. When we went there they explained the politics of communism. And we heard about the Andhra Maha Sabha.

The Second World War had started. India would have to fight the Germans and Japanese. If women were to take part in this battle, they needed to be trained in self defence and in guerrilla warfare. This was so that, when necessary, the women could also join the battle. They would tie up a stuffed bag and teach us to shoot. They also taught us Karate. I enjoyed it a lot. It was a school for training heroes. If we stayed in this we could earn great fame, perform great deeds—this was the feeling it generated, especially because they told us of the sacrifices of Jhansi Laxmi, Rani Rudramadevi and Alluri Sitaramaraju. I was called Jhansilaxmi, the heroic woman. This was the title that I got in those days. We were determined not to be behind the men in this programme. My sister also came to those classes.

Later, Ravi Narayana Reddy and ten or twelve others from

Telangana came. Suguna and her sister Sasirekha also came. We worked as part of the Communist Party. My brother and others used to form a committee and work together. It was in those days that they brought Gorky's *Mother*. As my mother did her work, we used to read this book out to her. It made a strong impression on her. Since her son was in the struggle, the idea of facing repression, suffering for her son—all this had an effect on my mother. So she came around to the view that on the whole we were doing some good work. We used to tell her about the freedom struggle. So, believing that we were doing good work she did not obstruct us in any way.

In those days we women came forward, we had an aim, we were filled with an enthusiasm. We felt firmly that we were equal to the men. That was so important. That was a time when there was purdah, when they used to oppress women terribly—there is no need to say anything about the life of ordinary women. If we consider the family circumstances, because ours was a *zamindar* family, some degree of freedom and a degree of respect was given to us. But the situation outside was very ugly. Men had total authority over women. Whether they beat them up or abused them women had to just lie still. After the struggle was intensified we used to walk on the streets after dark. I still remember after seven in the evening till about ten in the night, we could hear the sound of women weeping in every house. They would sob and cry with long drawn out sounds. Sometimes we'd hear women weep even till four in the morning. The men would reach home in the evening. Even if they thrashed their wives, the women could not say anything. If they spoke up they would be beaten even more. It was not possible to ask, discuss or talk over these problems in those days. It was the same in all except a few houses. Even in the labour bazaar we would hear such weeping in the mornings. Some used to die of disease. Some would weep unable to bear their poverty.

So women had to be brought out of this condition. And we felt that there was a direction, a path in what these people were saying and we took up the responsibility. We would sit together and discuss this. We believed that there was no other way. If women were to earn equal rights then they must be part of the struggle. We felt this was possible only through the struggle. Not only that: I feel that the Party took a far greater interest on the question of

women in those days than it does today. To bring women out, to rid them of socially oppressive customs, they carried on a campaign at the same time. In their Party resolutions, in their books and documents, this conviction is evident. They claimed that women are not weak (*abala*) but strong (*sabala*). So we were inspired. Then there was one incident. One girl related to us was to be married to an old man. We took the girl away and hid her in a distant relative's house. We used to roam about together when we were young. The wedding was fixed. She did not like it. She said to us, 'you are all fine. Your brothers are all together in the Sangham, you move so freely. No one talks of getting you married. But for me, they are catching me so young. I don't like it at all.' We told her to refuse to marry and we would hide her somewhere. My mother came to know about it but she didn't let out whether she agreed or not—she kept quiet. But when her aunts came to know, the backlash started. They said that we were ruining a marriage. They started an abusive campaign about us. They said that we were learning all this at the Sanghams and ruining other girls' lives. Anyway we took her through by-lanes and crooked paths to a distant relative's house. But they just brought her back from there and got her married. We discussed this in the Committee. 'What's the use?' we asked. 'Even after we hid her she was married off! What's the use of our working in these Sanghams? Even now these restrictions confront us.' 'Why didn't you defend her?' they asked. They decided to raise the issue in the Party Committee. But there was no support for it then.

Similarly there was another incident soon after. In Bhimmunigudem they wanted to marry off a young Brahmin girl to an old man. That girl was educated at Gurukula. They fixed a marriage she was averse to. She sent word to us. So we hid her in Bezawada, in Prajashaktinagar. By then the Party comrades were a little clearer. We used to sing the song [Gurazada Appa Rao's] *Purnamma** very often. As we talked of history, we also spoke of this. We said after all Purnamma's story was the same, why aren't you supporting this girl? But the people there used to be against communists—the people in our society. She was called Satyavathi. We hid here in Vijayawada. Once the marriage fell through she worked in our movement. We were very proud of that achieve-

* A very moving story narrated in the form of a ballet by Gurajada about a child bride being sold to an old man for a bride price. The girl, unable to bear the grief and ridicule of her friends, jumps into a well and kills herself.

ment. After the struggle against the Nizam ended, she settled down in a relationship which she chose. So breaking up that marriage was a big victory for us in those days.

Now, take Tapi Rajamma's case. She was a Brahmin. She was married to an old man and our State Party leaders helped her to escape at midnight from her house. There was a lot of propaganda that we were the enemies of the people. Whatever it was, either Gajjala Yellamanda Reddy or Nagi Reddy brought her out. That was a big issue.

Many people came into the movement in those days. We went to Bezawada, to the Training Centre camp. The women were given a special training programme. To hold a training camp and classes for women in the state in 1943—that was no small achievement. In that class there were 120 women, both married and unmarried. The ones who were married were from our families. Both husbands and wives were there.

During the Telangana struggle the question of lavatories was not such an issue but in Andhra it was a very big issue. In Andhra they also began a campaign against child marriage. They also discussed the issue of dowry. The demand for lavatories came up much later. Many issues came up during the course of our work. Women needed facilities. Maternity and other medical services should be available. That's all. We rejected many social traditions that were there. We used to analyse each issue with a communist perspective. We campaigned that women were equal. Just then there was a rise of consciousness like a swelling wave among the people. The Communist Party took up a campaign against *vetti* and the exploitation and injustice perpetrated on the people by the landlords.

In the beginning the Andhra Maha Sabha was in their (Congress) hands. But there was encouragement to take these slogans to the people from the Sabha. Even though it was the Congress, people like Narasinga Rao and Bhim Reddy Narasimha Reddy joined the Sabha and took these issues to the villages. After going into the villages it was as if the slogans began to take a shape and pick up a momentum of their own. The cadre which entered the village shaped the slogans anew through their consciousness. The slogans of that day were 'we must be free of the Nizam's rule', 'the domination of these rulers should go', 'Urdu should not be imposed on us', 'Telugu should get its rightful prominence'. So

you see it was a cultural movement. But when it was taken to the villages it was transformed into an anti-landlord campaign. We sang songs saying the moneylenders were exploiting our labour and our wages should be increased. Our songs said that although the law prescribed a measure of grain for harvesting, the landlords were not paying it. Another song which described the condition of the people carrying heavy loads on their heads caused a big stir among the people. In those days if the husband fell ill, the wife had to carry his load even if she had delivered a child just ten days ago; there were no roads then. If the *tahsildar* or any authority arrived in those days then all their luggage had to be carried to the village. In all this, the washermen, barbers and harijan communities had to share the work. After they arrived, food had to be cooked for them. For all this work they were given a small piece of land, *manyam*, for their use. This was if the landlords had some land. But whether it yielded grain or not, there was nothing else to depend on. How would that suffice? If the landlords cooked a lot, sometimes they would give them a little food, sometimes not. But there was a law that for each crop harvested so much had to be given. We demanded that this be implemented, and that *vetti* should be abolished. This idea caught the imagination of the people. Wherever we looked there was *vetti*. In the *patel's* houses, in the *patwari's* houses and in the *sarpanch's* house—wherever you looked there was *vetti*. These were all the hallmarks of a system of slavery. So, many were attracted by our slogans. But how were we to implement them? Some comrades travelled from village to village in groups. They carried the axes and the pounding staffs from the zamindar's houses. Otherwise who would have had the courage to say, 'we won't come for *vetti*' So what were we to do? However much we tried to encourage them, they couldn't stand up on their own. Saying, 'even if a case is filed against us, even if there is an attack on us let it be,' my brother got thirty people ready for a strike. I remember it so clearly. They stood on the path that day. They said, 'don't go, if they say anything, blame us, if you are scared, run away, but don't go to work.' And they stood before them on the path preventing them from going. But even then they would make some excuse, escape, and go to work. So they obstructed them and chased them away from work. Then the landlords complained to the police. My brother was at home that night. The police came. We knew that if he got into the hands of the police they would

thrash him. For a well known landlord family, going to jail or getting beaten up was a disgrace, so my mother gave him a cloth to cover his face and a brass water pot, and he escaped pretending he was just going to the fields to ease himself. After he escaped she came to the front door and had an argument with the police. 'What do you mean trying to enter my house at midnight?' she asked, 'that's against the law.' There were some laws then. They couldn't come in front of a window or look at the faces of the women in the house. Similarly the police couldn't raid in the night. 'I won't open the doors. You can sit there till the morning', she said. So if the police came for a search, they had to send word first. Then the women would gather in a room, set up purdahs, arrange for their protection, and only then could the police enter. So she argued and this gave them time to escape that night.

So my brother told me, 'I have to go. Tomorrow you go and see that the coolies don't go to work.' My sister was also there. He asked us both to go together and prevent them. But when we set out my mother said, 'you go if you want to, but she is married, she can't go—it won't look nice.' My brother-in-law was also there at home, there was no real problem but she refused to send her. So I went and obstructed the path. 'Don't go!' I said. 'Brother asked you not to go! The struggle will suffer a setback if you go. So you must stand firm. We must succeed. We are fighting for a larger measure of grain.' Then they agreed. This meant the strike was a success. After three or four days they increased the rate—not immediately—they didn't want it to look as if it was a result of the strike.

I was twelve then. I used to do whatever I was told to. That was how things were. It was all because of my brother. Accepting his view, my mother also followed. If we consider this a little deeply it means that the feeling for freedom is there in every individual. If someone or something awakens it, then they try to stand up. That is how whole families and people came into the struggle. It was not as if we conducted the struggle, the struggle took hold of us and moved us. It was the people who made us move forward. That much is certain.

The impression that was strongest when I was young—well we don't decide something in advance—was the need to struggle to liberate the land, to bring about a socialist society like Russia. To achieve a society like that these enslaved people must revolt—these

were the three things that were as plain as the nose on your face! But how exactly were we to conduct the struggle in practice, no one was decided. The people were afraid at first. So we set out initially as a squad singing songs. We did not say to them, 'if they take away your axes—strike back.'

People had to run in front of the landlord's cart, clearing the way. My brother stopped them once. 'Let's see what they'll do,' he said. The landlord alighted and walked up to them, ready to strike. But he didn't dare do anything. Saying, 'Just wait, you will see,' he left. . . . This is what will succeed, we thought. If we work this way, people will be drawn towards us, we thought. But when the landlords came to know that this kind of thing was happening they got some muscle-men together. The others were not going to keep quiet. They got together and went to the runner's house. 'Who do you think you are?' they asked. But all they did finally was to demand he pay a fine. We realized that if people rebelled, there would certainly to be a reaction, and wondered how to deal with it. We decided that whoever rebels should not be allowed to go back to his or her village. They should stay in our villages. But *we* should go back to that village—surely there were others there also who were similarly exploited—and talk to them and enrol them into the Chitti Sangham.

But how is it possible to lead ordinary lives after breaking our social connections? Their families were being harassed. The whole system was topsy turvy. The active younger section were people who had left their families. Wherever they went they would be fed. They would be kept in their relative's houses. There were so many stories told of people saying we want to join the Sanghams in our village. All this was because of the chits we gave for membership to the Sangham. So when they escaped and travelled, organizing, there was a sort of compromise. They said, 'all right we'll raise the wage a little, not a whole measure, but something.' They stopped harassing us. They said, 'come back to work, how can you sit idle like this,' and raised the wages a little. After such a compromise, other people would come seeking the Sangham organizers and saying they wanted membership chits for the Sangham.

It was about this time that the freedom struggle was intensified, we got our independence and the British Government fell. All this happened then. That had an effect on the struggle. The effect was that the little adjustments and increases that had been reached

during the struggle and which were a kind of compromise—the measures of grain or land that had been conceded to the peasants—were all taken back. The right of grazing on *banjar* land was taken away. So, on the one hand, there was a kind of concession, and on the other a taking away. But we took up good slogans. 'Whose land is it?', 'Who are they to drive us out?', 'Is it their land?', 'We must graze our cattle without any rent', and so on. These were the slogans that emerged. Our organizers moved into each area. We all carried staffs and so we were called the Gutipala Sangham (staff sangham). The landlords were ready to report us to the police.

Ailamma was a part of the struggle. Ailamma was a woman but she was also part of the Sangham. The men and women were both members. In a family both the man and wife were made members. The Sangham was like a family and we all fought together. They campaigned first about social reforms. But once the struggle intensified the emphasis on social reforms was pushed aside. The main struggle was against the exploitation of the landlords. So in that struggle they forgot how to keep women away, how to keep them behind, beat them and abuse them. They gave up these attitudes. Some kind of recognition that we were equal came only during the struggle. I'm talking about the ordinary peasants. The peasant women learnt to stand together and fight for each other during the struggle. But the people by and large were not concerned about men or women [gender]. They were concerned about the feudal exploitation and the system of *vetti*. The desire to come out of this impoverished life was shared by all equally. All men and women came out equally to fight for these issues. If women were drawn in and motivated to whatever small extent, it was during this period. Before that even they didn't know about such things. They just felt 'oh these are women!' But *now* it became necessary: because they joined the struggle immediately, joined the Sanghams, took up programmes, they agreed to do this work. When the men went to jail or had a case booked against them, only the women were left in the family. Whether the cattle needed tending, or the children needed tending or the family needed to be nurtured throughout that period it was the women who did it. So it was important to let the women know what was happening. They must be made ready was the feeling that men had. And so they had to see them as equal. But also whatever campaigns we had taken up

initially were continuing. If women were beaten or abused, the Sangham would put it before the people. Earlier it was the custom to call the landlords and have punishments given. But once the Sangham grew in importance, family disputes were also brought before the Sangham. Our people encouraged the attitude that family issues should be taken seriously and tackled justly. So women came in large numbers. Ailamma was one such example. Such families were so many. Ailamma was lucky to earn such a name, such respect. We held a meeting at Miryalgudem the other day and honoured her with a red sari. Even that was done far too late. We should have done it long ago on behalf of the women's movement. But earlier during the Andhra Mahila Sabha days although we didn't honour her like that they wrote a lot about her. Ravi Narayan Reddy and Sundarayya's histories mention her.

The chief reason Ailamma came in so prominently was that the first struggle was for land. She took courage in her hands and went forth. She came and led our people along with Narasimhan and harvested her land. She said, 'I'll see what the landlord will do.' Then he also stood up. Her husband was taken along with our people and put in Jangaon jail. They poured chilli powder into his orifices and beat him up, made him drink urine, and tortured him. She made a bundle of some cold rice, came to Hyderabad, met Ravi Narayan Reddy, told all the leaders; put it in the papers; prepared petitions; got our people together at the station to enquire into the harassment; made arrangements for bail and so on. In those days for a woman to do all this was no joke. She told our people and got all this done. She stood firm till she got the land. She bore all the hardships. When she died the other day I went for her funeral. There I remembered about the cradle songs.

We used to sing cradle songs once. Devuruppala, Kadivendi, Siddanapuram, Palakurti—we went campaigning to all these villages. The anti-landlord campaign, especially the struggle against *vetti* was very successful. The amount of labour was reduced. Then the struggle turned to the land. It was then that I went with the cradle songs. Maybe I was eleven or fourteen years then. We used to sing these songs. They refused to let the women working in the fields breastfeed their babies. They would force the women to squeeze the milk out on the bunds but would not let them go back to feed their babies. The women had to go for *vetti* and for planting but they could not go back to feed their babies.

You can find the songs in Ravi Narayan Reddy's book. You have to bend and swing as you sing the songs. Who would do it? Anyway as we were organizers it was not such a big problem. It was also a custom to sing and dance on every full moon night. But the songs were about God or Rama. We made up songs about the landlord's tyranny, the women's suffering, the loss of lands, the hunger, the reasons and so on. I remembered these songs the other day at Palakurti when I went for Ailamma's funeral. They showed me the land she had fought for. It is now the Mandal* centre. Although one might feel that these celebrations to honour someone like her are unnecessary, it does help raise people's awareness. Some leaders constantly want to be honoured. But it's so much better to honour the people who fought than to extol these leaders.

Today the Central Government has recognized those who fought in the Congress camps. They have been given certificates and they are getting pensions now. That is really terrible. If you consider the Telangana Struggle as a whole, even if you searched in every nook and corner to find the Congress people, they would only amount to five paise in a rupee. Yet, today they are the ones who pose as freedom fighters. People who were not even born that day, who did no work during the struggle, call themselves freedom fighters today!

Even when people who were very much part of the struggle and worked very hard, go and ask for certificates, they are told, 'you were not in our camp, you cannot get it.' If we have to pick out the freedom fighters in Jangaon, Suryapet or Warangal—whole groups of ordinary people were thrown into jail. Today they say that it is enough to have been in jail for a day to be entitled to a pension. If that is so, they should give pensions to half the village. Of course, half the people who fought are already dead. It's not right if they don't give pensions to at least a hundred people in each village. How many people were killed in each village! Each tree, each hill reminds you of the people who were shot there. Really even today the ground is soaked with their blood. How much torture, how many firings, how many houses burnt down, how much cruelty!

In one village, there was one remarkable incident. There was a harijan called Maisayya. He was grazing cattle in an enclosure. He had tied his bundle of rice to a tree. The squads had already been set

* New administrative divisions in Andhra Pradesh.

up then. My brother went there carrying his gun and said, 'I am hungry.' So the man fed him. Then my brother went his way. When that man went back into the village, the police caught him and asked him, 'Who did you feed? Where did he go? How did he come?' But he wouldn't utter a word although they tortured him. In the end they took the man, still alive, threw him onto a dry thorn bush, covered him with more thorns, and stamped on him with their boots. But even then he didn't say a word. He just said, 'I gave him some food and he ate and left,' he would not say anything more And so they tortured him to death. His family gets no pension. That's how things are today.

That struggle took shape that way and ended in the distribution of land almost on its own. The Gutipala Sangham, once established, came to blows with the *goondas*. All the people who got together were getting beaten up or wiped out. And they would have to escape. Then the police entered. The Nizam's police began to shoot down people whenever they pleased. Thus the struggle came to the next stage. Once they began to shoot our pepole down, they (our people) decided that the police camps must be blown up, they should not be allowed to exist there. They also realized that the staffs were no defence against the police and decided to seize guns from the landlords. Every landlord had guns to shoot birds. These weapons had to be captured. We had 200 people. If we went with our staffs, what could he do but agree. What could he do to 200 people? So they would go in groups of 20, seize the guns and hand them over to the people.

Some women were given training by Acchamamba on how to handle deliveries and give medical treatment. She trained many women in Vijayawada. The midwives were trained further in helping with childbirth. We used to arrange for the midwives, check on the people's health, distribute lands, set up committees, and so on. In Telangana each of these committees had two women on it. This committee was not like the one the Congress Government has set up now. These two women had to investigate the cases brought before the Panchayat and give their opinion. Only after that could a judgement be made. They also looked after other aspects of village welfare and women's welfare, but in the cases that came before the Panchayat, they were required to represent the women. Their opinion was very important, don't you agree? It was no small matter to support women like this.

In disputes concerning marriage it used to be the custom to impose fines on the women. Obviously the woman's parents would have to help pay the fine. But if she went home, how long could she stay back and work in the parents' house! And then there were the children to worry about. The parents would say, 'go back to your homes, we can't pay the fine.' So we decided that even if the woman was in the wrong she should not be fined. That was our decision. If the man was at fault then he should pay the expenses [maintenance]. It was like an awakening. People came rushing to us with their disputes. . . . But the men opposed it. What a terrible world this is, they said. But later they admitted, 'if one talks to women there's sure to be a rebellion.' There's a big struggle going on out there. But we should not take this struggle forward in a way that will obstruct that one. Certain sacrifices have to be made. But the question came up of why it was always the women who had to make the sacrifices. The reply was: 'if you consider this struggle as a whole, though it is a struggle of the working classes, the peasantry is also involved and they are making sacrifices that will ultimately benefit the proletariat. That is how the women should also regard this sacrifice.' It was difficult to swallow this. What are they saying, we wondered. What did we fight for all these days? Decisions involving this kind of double bind will not work. We created a bit of a stir. But gradually it became necessary for us to give it up. We never got the freedom we wanted.

We were not fully satisfied with this (having to give up). But that was the way to sustain the struggle. We had certain responsibilities to the squad. We had to bring together people who would join the squads. They would often have to oppose their husbands. Then we asked what are we to do? So we were told to bend backwards a little! This created discontent. It was inevitable. What was the conclusion? That we should always stay a step behind. That was the only conclusion. It is the same to this day. There has been no change. No chance to go to a higher stage--not then, not today. Not that there were no discussions about that. We expressed our dissatisfaction. In actual fact, when we accosted them and demanded an answer, they had to admit that we were right. But they said, though it is true at the level of argument, it is not practical. It would be sectarian and political struggles would suffer.

First I used to sing songs. I have given speeches. When I used to

go to the fields, and talk to the peasant women there, I felt really good. I used to speak at great speed! My work was quick too! Wherever I went and whatever I said—not a word of mine was wasted in those days. Now I feel—what is it I am doing now. . . it's like polishing the same pot over and over again [laughs]. The people didn't disregard our words even in those days. It was like sowing seeds—so simple. There was an immediate response. It felt so good. I grew skilful in public speaking. In the end we tried to get the people together to support the struggle, and to collect funds. Ravi Narayan Reddy, Badam Ella Reddy, Rafi Ahmed and I were together. When I lectured, people used to think I was B.A.! I was fourteen or fifteen years old. I had studied upto the fourth class or so. In those days even the women who had studied upto B.A. would not go on to a stage. I was called the 'darling child of Andhra Desam.' As I spoke in those days, people used to shower money at me. There were a lot of coins in those days. It used to rain money! Even the garlands were made of money. There was such enthusiasm. The lectures were very interesting. The people would flock to the meetings in huge numbers.

Then, when the Razakars had been driven out from here and the Gram Raj* was being set up, they called us to organize the Gram Raj. We were in charge of seeing that the Gram Raj was set up. Special issues were taken up, medical facilities arranged in the villages; we had to prevent the levy on grain from being paid or taken away. My mother-in-law also did this work. She couldn't sing much. But she began to make speeches and organize the villages in the second stage of the struggle. There was a great deal of work in those days. There was no obstacle. One never felt that the work was not being recognized or that we were being pushed aside. Later the work of the guerrilla squads and organizing them was ours. We had to recruit members for the squads, organize the volunteers and chiefly bring in women. It was not easy to bring women out at one go. And unless they had run away from their homes there was no question of asking them to go to the guerrilla squads. The struggles were taken forward by our people. They brought their wives into the squads if they were young and had no children. Many women who were not fit to join the squads would run away from home and come. Then there would be complaints.

* Communist Party rule in villages.

How were we to send these women back? There were some cases where the women were not sent back.

Then there were certain slogans that were for women. What were the programmes for women? When the men were going to battle with their slings, the women had to carry the stones and follow them. Women had to be trained in self defence in every village, without fail. To defend themselves from the police they should always carry a bundle of chilli powder tied to the cloth around their waists. When the police came they should throw the chilli at them and fight back. If the police came to their houses, they should be taken into the houses, their weapons snatched from them and then driven out. All this we were trained to do. Once in such a situation, the police became very furious and started raping women. In Akunoor and Machireddypally these things happened.

In each area the women participated equally and played their part. Those who came as individuals—if we see how many became leaders and how many just left—there were many problems. Even Ramulamma's case is the same. Ramulamma and her husband came in the first stage. Later her husband went back. She would not go back, it was not possible. She refused. She divorced him. There were some cases like that. She stood firm, fought boldly and went into the struggle. She married again. She did a lot of very important work. She faced many raids. When her squad was called 'Ramulamma's squad', her husband also said 'Bravo' along with everyone else. There was no ego there.

There are some documents that mention the involvement of women. There were discussions on whether women should be taken into the squads or not. Something happened once—Sumitra and I were given a piece of work. We were to start organizing a village programme. We were to meet the organizer of a region. We went to that comrade. We told him that the committee had sent us. So he promptly said, 'Oh my God, why have they put this load of corn on my head? How can I take up a programme with you? I can't do any work with women—I can't give you instructions or get it done through you,' and he told us to leave. So we argued with him and said, 'Who are you to give us instructions, we will work on our own. You will have to run after us.' After telling him that and working for three or four months we went to another place. As the movement had to be extended, we were asked to go and organize about 30 villages. All three of us were women—

Acchamamba, I and a lady from Warangal. We set up terrific Sanghams in all the 30 villages. The other comrades had to come to the village when there were heavy raids. They had to have our permission before they could come. Anyway if you went there you could hear a name. Rajakka is a great worker. Hearing this story and this song and dance the police would be very frightened. The people also learnt to exaggerate. Because they wanted the enemy to tremble. There was one principle for these villages. If ten of us went on a raid we should make the noise that twenty or thirty folk would make. So the people would shout like that. In the olden days that is how people went yelling into battle. Then the man who called us a load of corn came there. We had forgotten all about him. But he wondered, 'What is this name? What is this story? What is this about Swarajyam organizing a struggle in the forests?' He couldn't understand it at all. When he came here, you know the volunteers, they said, 'Who are you? You can't go anywhere.' After all we had rules. They told him those rules. He had to wait three days to see me. When he came with chit from our volunteers, I recognized him as such and such a chap! I had brought a squad of thirty when I came to see him. When I entered the village he came running and embraced me and lifted me up, exclaiming, 'Perhaps you don't remember the words I uttered that day. There is no comparison between what I said then and your appearance today. How did you succeed in doing all this?' How? It was like that. . .

There was another fighter called Nagamma. She was not even as tall as a rifle—she was really very short. If she slung a gun on her shoulder, it would touch the ground. She could shoot well. She used to insist on carrying a rifle even if it meant putting it on her shoulder. Her husband was a comrade, a squad commander. She was also in the squad. They planned a raid. The chowkidars were coming. There were always two policemen with them, protecting them while they collected taxes. Coming to know this they decided to shoot them on the way. According to that plan, one comrade hides in the way, then the commander, and at the very end Nagamma. So as the enemies draw near the commander they would be shot. The commander should fire his rifle. Then they would all surround him like a net. Nagamma from this side. Then they would be covered and throw their guns down. But the chowkidars came and passed. They were passing Nagamma. They must be shot when they are within range. Unable to fire his gun,

the commander hadn't fired. So they were going away. They had passed the spot where they should be fired at and were going away. So she thought one of two things has happened. Either the rifle failed or the brain behind the rifle failed and she fired at them. The rule in the squad is that no one should fire without the commander's orders. Anyway the chowkidars who were probably unarmed ran away. The police remained in the middle. So the raid was a success. They got the guns. But she didn't keep quiet, but turned on him and asked, 'Why didn't you fire on time?' They would never admit they had made a mistake. There was a serious discussion. He said she had no business to fire first. If there had been more than two there would have been trouble. He said it was her mistake. He wouldn't say that she had done the right thing. Because she criticized him severely, he began to sulk. She couldn't have cared less. They were about to break up, it seemed. . . . The leaders had to plead—it was Nagamma's fault not yours, they said. He was not educated, what could he understand? So such compromise was necessary. To illustrate how backward the communists were, this is a good example. What is the use of heightening such issues? She could always be transferred to another squad. So we made that compromise. . . . Anyway capabilities cannot be hidden for long. Gradually he kept falling back and she moved steadily forward. She even became the commander of another squad. He couldn't stand her becoming a commander. If she was the commander, how could he be just a member? I was the Area Commander at that time. I gave him a good dusting down. The Party chided me saying that I was partial to women!

If the women had any special problems they could talk to the committee members. That was possible if something happened in the lower committee but if it happened in the higher committees it was not possible to inquire. . . . To support each other we would have to discuss it at the committee level. How else would we have formed a separate group of women? It was not possible. There can't be a forum for women within the Party. It is necessary outside the Party, not inside. . . even if it were possible, we could not have done it. It would have only created internal problems but not brought any great change. There was no support. Women would raise some issues which were just placed before the committees as each one pleaded. Social issues were put before the committees. If the wife was beaten or abused, or someone took dowry, such issues

could be raised in writing before the committees. Every member (man or woman) held the right to raise them. These issues did not come up in a major way though. They were not issues that seemed large enough to break up lives. They would come up now and again. Sometimes major issues would also come up. For instance the question of gossip or scandal. We suffered not because of the struggle but when such individual scandals came up. When the movement was intense we did not pay heed to it. It was after we retired from the *maidan* (battlefield) and had nothing to do . . . in those days. . .

Husbands in jails, wives in squads—these were the situations when there was an attempt to use individual errors or mistakes. The responsibility was mostly on the women. We often wept. The comittees sometimes believed those scandals and took action. After all the same situation exists within the Party as outside in society. We could not go ahead. That was what troubled me most.

Sometimes we can't go further ahead. The Party—is it for us or for the people? It's for the people! Change has to be to the measure and extent acceptable to the people. So we can't go any further. Apart from this, when women wanted to enter the struggle and their families opposed it, we sent the women back, saying there was no use in their coming then. There were many such instances. What did it mean? It really meant that the men didn't support it and so were sending the women back. Is that true or not? If the husband was a comrade in the Party that was different. If the comrade didn't come into the struggle, it was not possible to drag the wife into the struggle. Otherwise one should take a divorce. . . . How about their life? That way we took a few, one or two or three who wanted to join the squads. But their husbands were ploughing and said, 'How can you take them? All right we can get another wife!' That way a few came. But highlighting these and discussing such incidents we can draw no lessons. By taking individual cases and doing some research we do not get any lessons about the struggle. There are no lessons that concern the struggle. Nor can we evolve a line for the future. What we can do jointly for social change is the main question we should ask. After all the Party higher committees had also to give economic support to the women who sought a divorce. So during discussion a certain attitude that was bound by definite rules was what emerged. There was no going back and forth in what they said. It was only when it came to the

stage of implementation, because of the social drawbacks, there was a kind of indecision, a fuzziness. Why, when it comes to that, many ask me, 'You fought such a big struggle. You were a heroine. Why are you still wearing that *mangalasutra*? What are these bangles for? What is this costume?' I was always with the people. I was never in an office, sitting and writing. I was always in the political field. Now if we go among the people, and dressed differently, that is no use—not in the villages. I know that from experience. If I remove all these and go, everyone will question me. We couldn't go around among the people with these sleeveless blouses [pointing at one of the interviewers!]. I'll tell you one thing. They comment. If we are like them then we create a good impression, they feel that also. These women have families and children, we can only put into practice what they say is possible. We had a woman organizer with seven children. She used to work very hard. Whenever our cadre assembled they would say, 'You can roam, how about us with our housework and our children?' Then I used to say, 'Oh you are talking of children, see Govindamma has reared seven children. She is also working in the Sangham, much more than everyone else. Why can't you do it? Begin and you will find it can go on.'

After all, you don't sit still at home. You keep on working after all. You do a lot of work that is wasted. Why don't you set things like that aside and do this? Going to temples, singing devotional songs, things like that, that is a waste. The family is something you can't avoid anyway. I also do some cultivation. We have to work for our food, for the Sanghams, and for the Party. But when our men wanted to enter politics we had to go back into our homes. Then we had to go back, do the cultivation or work at some job to support the children. If I have survived in politics so far I am only half of Swarajyam, not the complete one. I was not able to produce to the fullest extent of my capacity. The reason for that is: who was to take the responsibility for the family—that was the issue. After we were married, till two months before my son was born, I roamed about campaigning. At the time of the delivery—what can I say to any one?—in my heart there was pure distress. 'So that's the end of my political life,' was the feeling as I delivered the child. I thought, after six or seven months, I must give the boy to someone and jump into it again, I did a lot of thinking. Was it for this rubbish domestic life that I'd made such a big sacrifice?

Ordinarily I would have married a person well off and, if that had been the desire, led a comfortable life. After such a great struggle what was this living such an ordinary life? No food, no clothes—not enough. Rather than lead this life of drudgery wasn't it better to go away? After six months I wanted to leave the baby with an aunt of mine. Her husband died when she was young. She had no children. When I tried to persuade her to keep the child, she refused. 'What is this struggle?' she asked. 'You want to dump the child on us and go?' and she refused. What could I do? I brought him back. What was I to do for food? I had to grow it. There was an obstacle to my working for the struggle, but where was the obstacle to my working for a living? So I went and cultivated the land. I felt my life was finished. Only if I cultivated the land would the general movement come. At that moment they will certainly send for me! I was a speaker wasn't I? That was my weapon. My speaking was as much a weapon for me as the gun is to the guerrilla. However big the meeting, they would send for me. Once the call came there was no holding back. I would hoist the child on my hip and go. I would make a speech and come back.

There, that's how I was able to put forth my opinions clearly and well. That's how, when the CPI was splitting or when the terrorist issues came up, Basavapunnaiah and Sundarayya would come and hold discussions. 'This is our line. What do you think? What do you feel about this?' They set great store by my opinion. As a result of that I used to stay in touch.

But it was a disgusting life. I had to bear many hardships. It troubled me a lot, I shouldn't talk about it. No money to pay for a paper. No money to put the children to school. Not enough to buy the needed clothes. I had a big complaint against my husband. No matter how hard I worked, he never tried to help. After the baby was born it came up for discussion. 'What is my life?' I asked. 'You are not doing anything for women. If the women just go back where they came from, you will be left begging. So if you just support me a little then I can carry on as I did before.' So they said, 'all right' and sent for me. Who was to go? One of us had to stick to the house. The Party can't support us after all. Who was to stay back? 'You decide between you.' When I asked him he said, 'I can't work like you in the fields and earn money like you. It is not even any big income.' But I always felt that cultivating was an independent occupation. There was no point in thinking. How was

I to demonstrate my presence? He had to stay in politics. If I left the house to him and entered politics then it wouldn't work. Our life together would also break sometime. It would get to a divorce. Why face all these problems? So I said, 'O.K. I'll pull on. You don't have to worry; you stay—you don't go away to study.'

I had complained to the State Committee that he had paid his fees to study. . . he was choosing another path. Both the Party and I would lose him. So he must be told to drop the idea! For some days he was angry with me for complaining. Anyway I managed to put him on the path I approved of. He was a good worker but was not visible outside. He was a man with very constructive capabilities. There was a lot of difference between his way of working and mine. I have no constructive vision or capabilities. When will I get it? In the Party there was a lot of argument between us. He was a Pradesh Committee member. I remained exactly where I started. Whenever I found time I kept taking part. Well there were women's movements. And we kept working at it a little at a time. There was no continuity in that. The young one was two years old. With the China War when all these people were arrested, I got a letter from the State Centre. This is a time of danger. Your presence is important now. No matter what your problems are, you must come to the front. You must let your voice and your words be heard. The movement started with civil rights. Namboodripad was coming to Khammam and I threw my young one over my shoulder and got out. I covered myself with a sheet. It was very cold. I went and sat with the people. Then they announced, 'Wherever Swarajyam is, please come up.' I rose with the child on my shoulder, put him down on the stage and began to speak. They all said there is no connection between what she looks like and her ability. Look how powerfully she spoke about civil rights. I was in the Jilla Committee until just the other day. After my wedding I took part in the general movement. But I was not in the Committee, organizing things or working as a Secretary.

Recently I was given the responsibility of organizing women. These men sent the women to the Sanghams as they sent them to festivals. They do not really encourage them. They think of things but it doesn't work. Like Ramulamma, we must stand on our own feet. Unless we do so, no one will think this woman will be of use in a great struggle and so let me stay home, do all the work and send her out. What they actually say is: 'Don't we also do the work? If

women are to be equal does it mean that we should send the women out and take up their responsibilities at home? What's all this about?'

What sort of demand is it that depends on others? Each one must protect her own rights. Both these struggles have to be carried on by women. Every woman has to maintain her position both at home and outside. She has to fight to do so. If women behave themselves then they are looked after well. Just as a landlord looks after his labourer quite well. He gets all his drudgery done and at sunset gives him a pot of toddy, 'here, drink and eat,' and the labourer says, 'my *dora* is a good man.' It's the same with women. There is nothing more to it!

Till I stood for election as an MLA (Member Legislative Assembly) in 1978, I didn't even know what the Assembly was like. I travelled all over in Andhra—from Madras to Vizianagaram—and lectured, but I had never seen a gallery. After I was elected I stepped through that gate for the first time. I had not even seen the Public Gardens or anything else. I was so busy. I still don't know how to do four jobs and spare myself some time. Whatever comes before us we take it up. . . we are all like that. As an MLA I had a good opportunity to get together people from the public. But I did not achieve anything. If people asked, 'We voted for you, what have you done for us?' what could we say? That we did such and such? As an MLA there are certain limits. There is the constituency. There is a connection with the voters. If we neglect the voters of the constituency on any count, we create a bad impression. Why, they abuse you to your face. 'What is this—you collect votes and then just go away?' They are our people, they are communists so they are very conscious. Our state leaders (women) said, 'to hell with your Assembly, at least now you will have time for the women's organizations.' Then [when she was an MLA] there was no time to bother about the women's organizations.

When I highlighted the Rameeza Bee inquiry [a well known rape case in which the woman, Rameeza Bee, was raped by policemen, and her husband killed], many incidents came up for discussion later. Now not a single case is being questioned. Everyone would take part in the discussion. Even the Congress MLAs would say it was an injustice and interfere. At that time the dowry question was not so acute. Now it is like a multiheaded monster. Now the Telugu Desam [the ruling party in Andhra today] MLAs have

nothing to say. Those days even men used to discuss these issues—men like Venkaiah Naidu, Jaipal Reddy used to raise questions of atrocities. Now the chief issue is dowry. There is a state of no protection. We can't trust any human being. It is an acute stage. I feel property rights are very important. To eliminate dowry one needs regular property for women. We should campaign against dowry and for property rights. Actually the women in the village don't even get a bellyful of food. They have to work harder than machines. Their health is bad. These agricultural labourers should be bold, be able to stand on their own economically and get equal wages—otherwise this society will not survive. In the villages the women must stand up for the economic struggle. Most women work as agricultural labourers. In our village we enrol the agricultural labourers as members in our women's organizations. We must set up the Mahila Sanghams and then give it enough time. Then they won't ask, 'why aren't you doing something? Why are you an MLA?' But that is my platform, the one I've been given. I am doing what I can there. These responsibilities are such that I'm not able to come to the Sanghams and conferences here. The men should also explain these things to the people. But what do they know? They just stammer—*the-tha-tha-na-na-na*! You must have feelings; everyone should feel. But not everyone can speak. Only some can speak.

Even on my own children there is this terrible influence. They are scared. They don't want to come into the movement. One daughter of mine has done her BSc. At the time we thought she should marry a full-timer in the Party, there would be no need to give a dowry, but she said, 'I've seen how you live. I don't want a life like that. These are Party matters. I don't feel it's such a good thing to keep working either for the Party or the movement at such cost!' She found someone else. They wanted dowry in cash and we refused. Two or three matches fell through like that. So we felt there was no use in refusing to climb down, and we sold some land and gave them some money. We had problems with them but finally they agreed to a simple wedding, exchanging garlands. They were connected to the Party. The groom was doing his B.E. What else could we have looked for? We have to consider the children's future after all. She was very articulate. If she had come into the movement she would have been a speaker like me! I feel quite upset at that. But I was disturbed when she spoke like that. I

was in no position to insist that she should follow this path, that there was no cause to worry. Even if they had no feeling for communism, if they had been encouraged to stand up perhaps they would have got used to the Party life. But I was not able to insist. I could not speak of my own troubles. You have to experience them to know. It is difficult to work with these problems of the family. It's really very hard. You can't do as much as you want to. It is like being caught between the frying pan and the fire. There is no satisfaction either. People like us who have worked all our lives, now we sit and talk, but do you know how much I have wept, unable to bear it all? Still we couldn't leave. We wanted politics. We felt we were born for politics and a political life and would die for politics. If only it had been a support economically as well! Still we didn't feel scared—not one bit. We did not swerve from our principles. I pride myself on that. After becoming an MLA, after all the hardships, it is possible to make mistakes. But my life has not changed. I was young but I have never taken a pie. Besides I would always help someone who needed help, no matter what the difficulty. Whether I lived in the MLA's quarters, or whatever else I've done, there has been no change in me. I've no desire to build houses or live well or do such things. It means we have arrived at a stage. We've reached a stage of stability—no indecisions. We meet women who took part in the struggle as we move around here and there. Laxmi left the Party long ago. I went and saw her two or three times. If there are elections in the organization one has to contest. But she would not talk to me. After all one has to support the Party doesn't one? Friendship comes only later. One must fight when it is necessary.

We also thought there should be a women's history. We wanted to write about Ailamma. There are hundreds of people like Ailamma. Their history has just vanished without trace. Who can do this? Only people like us. Only the people who took part can do it. My life never gave me the chance—to listen to the radio, to read books, to take up pen and paper and write. I worked twenty-four hours in the field. In the movement I did the speaking and left, that's all. There were days when I did not even get the daily paper. Days when I was underground in the dark! What can I write? To spend money and get someone to write is also difficult. The Party will not take the responsibility of paying so much. None of us have those kinds of resources. Not Ramulamma, not Satyavathi, not

me—none of us wrote. Who else will write? It is because *we* could not write that it came to you.

During the movement someone came to me and gave me a book of interviews like this to read. I read it then. But my eyes gave me trouble, even though I wore glasses. For a week I did no work. I just sat there thinking. I read that book with such interest. I read books even now, but I can't get books so easily when I want them.

It was a kind of rebirth for many of us. It is hard to tell you the story of that life—only a few of us who were very deep in it can tell you. Not all can speak of that time. Even I who was in it continuously, I cannot remember all the details. We learnt so many things, suffered so many hardships, who can remember it all? For five or six years after, I did not even run the family. I just sat reliving all that suffering. What is this? How has it turned out? Why is my life being wasted?, I kept asking myself. Now I feel, well there are moments in history when people are needed and so it all happens. This is my conclusion now. But then we couldn't come to such conclusions. My mind was so troubled. I could not find any peace at home. I was in such bad shape. My sister can tell you a few things too. What did we achieve in the question of property rights? Even the women's organizations did not take up this question systematically. They felt, 'Why give this property right such importance? We are working for the poor aren't we? Where is the question of property among them?' My sister argued fiercely that one could not have a women's organization without considering the problem of property rights for women. My sister used to argue that a class struggle is incomplete without the participation of upper and middle class women. Even though she was considered a bourgeois outside, she had to struggle at home. After all it was my brother who brought us into the movement. We roamed around everywhere and distributed land. Only those who owned 125 acres of land were allowed to keep it. The Party decided that anything more should be distributed. According to this we had more than 250 acres. We, my brother, younger sister, I and the older people had to divide it among us. There was a problem. . . my brother had married a widow—considered revolutionary in those days. Ravi Narayan Reddy had performed the ceremony. My sister-in-law didn't agree to division in the property. She opposed it because that was not customary (according to customary law). All of us were quite poor, yet she said that there was no law, let's see when it

becomes a law. Being on the State Committee, I wrote a letter to Chandra Rajeshwar Rao. Instead of equal distribution, we settled for one share among the three of us. Even that was difficult. This question was placed before our Committee. The general feeling was that property rights for women would not make much difference. But the young girls supported property rights. There was also a feeling that it would be better for the boys to come and stay in the girl's house after marriage rather than the girls going to the in-law's house. However no one was convinced about a bill on property rights for women.

What are we to do with women, was the question. When the struggle was over they decided that the unmarried women should go and marry, the married ones should go back to their families! The men should study law. We didn't have a say at all. Till then we had never thought of families or children or of holding on to them! They said it was not possible for us to become Party Commanders or Area Organizers. So they asked us to 'set ourselves right' and we felt very upset. This was a mistake in the turn that the struggle took. The armed struggle had changed. So they kept the cadre they needed to carry on the legal movement. What that movement was to be, had yet to be decided and carried out. So it was not as if they asked only the women to go. The men also had the option to go. But there was no other possibility for us. There were opportunities for the men to study and work in society. But what did we women have? On the whole it was as if we were cast out on society. In a struggle you don't see how many people are sacrificed. You only see what the movement needs. Women are just suppressed more. That is their usefulness. So after the struggle they said, 'go back to your village and marry.' Marry whom? Which fellow would have the guts to marry these women? It was a serious issue then. Many men who married in the Party went home and married ordinary housewives again. In each one's life right up to the end there was some kind of problem or the other.

No, they won't recognize us! Why should we ask them to recognize us? They are the leaders—but do they hold all the rights? They are the *karthas* (subjects) of the movement! Why do you make them responsible for our lives as well? I can't agree to that. Who were the subjects in that movement—the people, history, we. How could they create a situation where they could 'set right' the women, and get them back into their customary roles? They

couldn't do it. They used us to the extent they could in the movement. If social circumstances had improved and economic conditions had changed, our situation would also change—that was the feeling. They did not take an interest and try to develop the context. We must make them recognize our right to fight. What have we decided to say about the future? That's also a question isn't it? How will the women in the future act, what will they do—we should be able to predict this. We need to do more research, discuss it more. We must come to the correct decision. Something that someone said or some single feeling is not enough. For women to fight there were so many difficulties to face that they were afraid. So they were not bold enough to protest or rebel. That is why they decided that it was better to follow some path—it would be simpler and they were trying very hard to follow that path. Their attempt was not in accordance with the social awareness of the time. But that does not mean the women were not fighting or that consciousness was not continually rising somewhere or the other. If a woman burns to death or is killed, it is a result of her protest. She struggles and so is a victim of violence. When did the landlords really start resorting to *goondaism*? It was when the coolies and bonded labour began to revolt. So changes cannot come in society unless there is a change in the base. Without changing social relations, without upheavals, there can be no change. The changes that come superficially will be like this—sporadic.

Now to strike a blow at these social relations we must adopt certain extreme slogans as slogans for our propaganda. We must discover principles of practice. What is the use of slogans that cannot be implemented in practice? They will have no weight, the people will not agree. These people will fall into the wrong path. For the struggle the social relations, the principles, the extent, etc., are decided by the scientists and the ideologists. So the Party plans and sets up a scheme of action according to these principles. Marx prepared the philosophy. The men who began to implement it were Lenin and Stalin. So each country should plan for itself. That plan should suit the situation in the country in order to develop. Then the people will take part. The man who plans is the leader. The rest are all people. So who can estimate the role of each person? The movement is the people. The people create history because they take part in the field and the story of the struggle—every inch, every foot, every yard—is on their side. But there is also the role of

the one who drives them. Unless the people take part in that struggle it can't be created. There is no history you can write without the people. One can write only a number of individual histories. It is not the history of society as a whole. Yes we have these experiences, but who is there who wants to know about them? To recognize its value needs a political consciousness. Maybe it works today among educated women. . . . In those days they felt, 'Oh she's worked . . . that is enough' [laughs]. Although women are not recognized in society a lot of activity is carried on by them. it is the ones with a bourgeois mentality who say this is wrong, that is wrong, who say this is her domination etc. But in the working class even when the men are inefficient the women continue to carry on. The women who work have problems working here and at home. Get home and you do all the work again. That is the real death. You may get money but what of this double burden?

I once read a book called *Women in Social Change* and it discusses the role of women in Vietnam, in China and Russia. It looks at the situation of women in socialist society. It was quite a good book. It describes what women's work was like. There are no such educative books these days. Mainly if you look at it and summarize it, it says that each class should struggle, the women of each class should be motivated—that is the chief task. Even the classes were political classes. The agricultural labourers were women. We needed to mobilize them in the movement of agricultural farmers. Similarly with the working class, fighting for economic demands in the factories. This is what we are doing. But to take up issues concerning women or instruction about women—this is not our main programme. Wife beating and so on: we are not focussing on these things now. On the whole the total liberation of women is not only not possible in the Communist Party, it is not possible anywhere. When the whole society is changed we will be liberated. Until then we have no hope. For a few changes, we have to work doubly hard now. In the public meetings I talk of how to struggle, what the reason for our oppression is and so on. The first issue is poverty. The reason for poverty is exploitation. Then there is domination by husbands. The domination of men in society. 'Let us start a struggle against that,' I suggest, but if you ask the women, they will say the struggle should be economic. They will not mention the social demands first. It is when we begin to stand on our own feet economically that the internal struggle starts.

These two have to be coordinated. Then the struggle against male domination starts. More than just consciousness there will have to be thinking. There will be no need to tell anyone anything. There is a contradiction between men and women that is something like a class contradiction. These acts of violence and the other rubbish will carry on till we achieve an equal status. So much politics, so many years, has there been any change? Sometimes it seems as if the old days were better. In the old days even if the women slaved there was a little respect and a little responsibility towards women. 'What can a fellow who cannot even feed his wife do?' was a proverb in those days. Does anyone think like that these days? Can anyone lay his hand on his heart and say I'm maintaining my wife? Really it is the wife who is maintaining them. If you remove from his pay the part he spends on his drink, then the expenses are two parts from her savings and one part of his. Even that one part does not reach the family. Anyway I can tell you one thing. Even in those days the traditionalists in the Communist Party said that women should make sacrifices for the honour of the family.

In the present situation even if she falls back, she should be encouraged to come forward and grow towards the issues. That commitment is not there. Some of the Party decisions sound quite good. But when you consider them individually the women may actually be more capable than the men. But they do not get any encouragement. If a woman says she was encouraged it is self deception. We have to think things through carefully and nurture the men. Women who are capable should bring the men forward: we must work with the understanding that we ourselves might fall back otherwise. There are some examples. In cases when the woman goes ahead (of course she's always ahead) whichever party it is, because male domination is in the blood today, you have to fight gradually and depending on the opportunity you have at every stage. But that is not the main struggle. The political struggle is the main struggle. So I say during my public speeches that one must carry on both the struggles. The men fight a single battle, superficially. They put their towels over their shoulders and set off for a procession. They repeat whatever they are told. But we are not like that. We must struggle at home. If we can, we go for the procession, otherwise we don't. We can't do anything without hurting men. Let it hurt if it must. Don't they sit back even when they know that women lack comforts? Does it hurt them? We

work as hard as we can. But that work must get proper recognition. It should be respected. These are our demands. To say that they should give it on their own is a kind of weakness on our part. The suffering that women in the political arena find most difficult to bear is the work at home and the work outside. To keep a relationship going with one's husband you have to struggle constantly. But he's not bothered about it. He has only one worry, that family life will be disturbed. What is the answer to this? It would be better if she became inactive—without her at home, he is handicapped. That is the only problem he has always. It is one incarnation at home, another outside. One has to switch even as one crosses the threshold.

Afterword

When we began these interviews what struck us about each of them was the excitement and the release that this period held for the women who participated. During the interviews we shared their sense of immense possibility, of a new horizon opening up for them. What also affected us deeply was the openness and trust with which we were received. It was almost as if the simple fact of recognizing their experience, seeing it as valuable and worth recording entitled us to share a part of that experience. Their past history constituted, as it were, the basis of our attempt to recover for ourselves a tradition of struggle. It was as if this attempt of ours had revived the significance of their own struggle after a long period of silence. Kamalamma said, 'They told me your story will also be history, but until you came, who asked for our story?' Swarajyam said, 'Who wrote our history? Who interviewed us? When you are doing this, shouldn't we at least tell you [what happened]?'

They welcomed us like long lost friends, spent time with us ungrudgingly, and asked us to come again. They saw our project as significant and felt duty bound to contribute. We were fed, looked after, and even given small sums of money for our expenses. Their confidence in our capacity to carry this project through added an even greater responsibility to this task.

Who were these women? Where did they come from? Why did they pour into the movement in such large numbers?

There were women of all kinds from different backgrounds and with different experiences. Some from peasant, and middle class families. Some even from landlord's families. One was brought up in an orphanage and took up a teaching job to support her mother; another belonged to a tradition of devadasis; one had walked out of a violent and disastrous marriage; yet another was from a traditional Brahmin family and was married at the age of five. Many were women from the middle class, forced to observe one

form or other of purdah; women whose lives were circumscribed by the kitchen and the household. These women suddenly discovered the opportunity of experiencing something other than producing for the family.

To understand a little more about the status of women in that period it may be useful to look briefly at the 'areas' and 'boundaries' within which they were confined. Hitherto the distinction between the private world of the family, domestic labour, sexuality and reproduction, and the public world of production, of politics, and war, had been maintained clearly. Women were relegated to the private world. It is necessary to see how clearly the two are interlinked although they seem apparently unconnected. It is not as if women had total control over the private world. The actual control of the private world lay in the hands of men who moved fairly easily between the two. This private world, apparently the world of women, is also designed to cater to the needs of men. The wall dividing the private world from the public world, however, had been impenetrable for these women. They had not even peeped beyond its confines. Dayani Kausalya tells us that before the struggle they had never stepped outside the four walls of the home—not even into their own fields. But purdah was not just the visible and outward symbol of that separation of the two worlds. It was an ideological barrier that controlled their vision, thought and personality. It is the *laxman rekha* which a woman crosses risking her very existence, the point beyond which her personal virtue, her chastity is no longer any protection.

Although the peasant women were not confined to domestic production and seemed to move freely into the public sphere of production, war and political action were outside their reach. For these peasant women the distinction between the public and private spheres was not as rigidly and clearly demarcated. They moved fairly easily between the two. It was they who built up the struggle in the villages against the repression of the Nizam and the Razakars. Faced with *vetti*, the sexual bondage of the devadasi system, the assumption that they were sexually available to the landlords, the forced levies and the grinding poverty, it was the peasant women who bore the brunt of the oppression, and later, during the struggle, of the repression. After 1944 when the repression increased, many of the men moved to the forests while the women remained behind, holding together what was left in the village. The

women formed the backbone of the resistance. They drew on group support. They realized that their strength lay in numbers, used traditional ritual occasions like childbirth, death, or a girl reaching puberty to stay together and foil attempts of rape and torture. They drew on the skills they had and the everyday objects around them to defend themselves. Chilli powder, slings and pestles formed their weapons. The majority of the women who participated in the Telangana Struggle were like this. Unlike the few heroines of the movement, these were the numberless ones who belonged, as it were, to the prehistory of the movement. It is conventional to pay tribute to the masses who fought any war, but it took us some time to recognize and accept the real importance of these women—what they meant, more so, what they could have meant to the movement. The simplicity with which they articulated their experience,—'we left our pots and ran into the jungle'—the inability to speak of the details of their personal lives made their tales seem repetitive. Ailamma tells us time and again how her crops and grain were laid waste, and her daughter raped. Many said: 'Was it a single trouble we suffered. For us to tell you? What is there to tell?' And yet the pain, even the bitterness that was so clear in their voices as they talked, could not be ignored. The starkness with which they described how their families and households were destroyed, how they were beaten and tortured, was clear and totally unsentimental. And yet as they spoke of this period there was a nostalgia which revealed how significant it was to them personally. The stimulation, the support and excitement of working with a resistance movement came through clearly.

For them it seemed as if the walls of the household had suddenly fallen apart. The time was such, and the hope of a new society so near, that the men in the struggle realized that they could never achieve it without their women—and without a newer, freer woman.

During the period of struggle women were drawn in in large numbers, partly out of the conviction that they had a role to play as half the human race and partly out of necessity. In times of severe repression the presence of women and their active involvement has been indispensable. They are invariably the providers of the movement and lent credibility to the squad among the villages. It was their presence which lent the semblance of a family and thus provided cover to the dens. There was also the feeling that if

women were also involved they would not stand in the way of their men joining the struggle. The presence of women created trust among the villagers and added a sense of respectability.

Moving into the struggle did mean a tremendous liberation for these women—they believed that it was possible to break with custom—to travel alone, travel at night, carry guns, act as couriers, fight in squads—all of which they did. Kondapalli Koteswarmma describes how they pawned their jewels, went to the bank, and sold newspapers on the streets.

There can be no question of the fact that their involvement with the Party provided a significant growth in consciousness for the women. Reading, writing, discussing political questions, attending classes, addressing public meetings and organizing women gave them a very positive sense of their role. Priyamvada says: 'We gained the confidence to speak at public meetings. We spoke so well that people would come and ask us if we were B.As. or M.As. In one way if we had no connection with the Party we would have been ordinary women who knew nothing.' Talk to Kamalamma and she tells us she grasped the meaning of her experience and was able to respond meaningfully only because she came into the struggle. 'It's because of the Communist Party that my learning stood me in good stead. But my sister has forgotten everything and it's all wasted now,' she says.

It was as if the Party gave them a chance to make practical sense of whatever learning they had. It gave them the tools to understand their social reality and was a source of enormous strength and clarity. They felt that the struggle brought them widsom, knowledge, clarity and enormous physical stamina. Acchamamba says: 'I don't know how I did it—it was just the magic of that time.' Kondapalli Koteswaramma says: 'It was the Party that said to us: come, and gave us encouragement to come out.' Dudala Salamma tells of that time and says: 'I don't know how I got the wisdom out of all that . . . at least you learnt the letters but I've lived grazing buffaloes. All these details are at the tip of my tongue.' Dronavalli Anasuya says: 'It was the Party that made us all human beings.' Women described to us vividly the liberating effect the movement had on their lives and on their growing consciousness. Let us look briefly, however, at what the Party had to say about the women in the movement and their contribution to it. Devulapalli Venkateswara Rao says: 'In public meetings women would form fifty

percent of those present. In Nalgonda for instance we had to reserve half of the seats for women. This condition during public gatherings lasted until 1951' (Peter Custers: unpublished interview).

Women evidently flocked to public meetings and also came forward to join the movement in large numbers. They came leaving home and family behind, without thought or care for their personal safety or the risk involved. Ravi Narayana Reddy says:

> Everywhere resistance was put up by our local volunteers. Here women were a supplementary force. People moved out to confront it with slings and stones. Women carrying the stones for the slings . . . In Mallareddygudem for example the fighting lasted for eight hours. Here a female stone-cutter was killed called Nagamma. Her name is never mentioned but she was very heroic.

From the interviews with the peasant women who took part in the resistance as well as statements such as these by leaders, it is evident that women came not only into the movement but also to join the Party in considerable strength. Given this fact, can we see any consistent policy about motivating women or recruiting them into the Party? Kota Venkata Reddy says:

> For the first time in history the feeling [existed] that women and men are equal. Apart from the economic struggle, propaganda in favour of women's equality [was conducted]. People [were engaged] in a complete struggle, there was no need to have a separate struggle for women (Peter Custers: unpublished interview).

He goes on to add that the Party took up a programme to fight rape by Razakars, and instructed the women to fight collectively to protect themselves when the Union Army came. It also took up a campaign against wife beating, child marriages and encouraged divorce where necessary. They campaigned against the derogatory phrases generally used of women in cultural propaganda. He adds:

> In the Communist Party the percentage of female members was ten. Aside from that many women sympathised. There was no discrimination against women becoming members but the low percentage is because of women's backwardness in traditional society.

This suggests that the leadership believed that there was no conscious discrimination against women but it was their traditional backwardness which prevented their coming into the Party. Priyamvada seems to feel differently:

> They [women] probably felt that if they came to the Party where men and women worked together freely, their lives would change for the better. They could not say all this very clearly but they felt that they could experience another life, live as they chose to. But the Party could not support them as it did not have a clear idea of how to tackle the problem of women who left their husbands and came away. They were also not sure whether it was the correct thing to take such women away from their husbands. They were afraid that the Party would lose its reputation. It would have been good to support these women. After all the Party had a base. These women wanted to come away because they found their situation unbearable. So many women came willingly in those days. There was a context then.

This feeling of equality betwen men and women, the possibility of a better life where men and women would work freely together, the promise of a different experience evidently brought women flocking to the struggle. It is as if their backwardness in traditional society instead of holding them back as suggested, actually impelled them towards the alternative that the Party seemed to provide. But the Party found it very difficult to absorb these women into its ranks, risking its reputation and in the process alienating public sympathy. Women thus were not seen as people possessed of will and determination but as separate, embarrassing and burdensome. There was also a deliberate and malicious propaganda outside that there was no morality or principle in the Communist Party.

It is also a fact that in times of upheaval when in reality social norms are being broken and old values begin to crumble, a stronger effort is made to visibly and vocally reiterate faith in the old morality. And so we find what appears to be a reinforcement of traditional ideologies. This could be the basis for the fear that it may not be the correct thing for the Party to 'take women away from their husbands.' So women had to fight against traditional beliefs and a feudal outlook even to become a part of the political struggle. That supporting the women in these personal struggles and politicizing the context of that struggle could have brought a new and progressive philosophy into existence was apparently a possibility that the Party did not realize. For us the fact that such a Party, given its progressive ideals and structure, did not realize the significance of the connection between ideology and everyday life, especially for women, is a matter of real regret. Exploitation and

oppression do not disappear automatically after any struggle. A conscious analysis of every step one takes, of one's day to day thoughts and actions is necessary to establish a new philosophy for a new life. The Party's capacity to understand their struggles and support the women was crucial to their political survival.

Given the backwardness of women in traditional society and the power of the ideology of the family it is not surprising that their presence was seen as a source of problems:

> Yet although there were few female squad members, bars to women's participation were absent, generally [their coming] was not preferred because of technical difficulties.

We can see how confusing this would have been for the women. On the one hand there was no bar on their coming and yet there was the feeling that their coming would cause difficulties! These difficulties were of course related partly to the belief in the physical weakness of women and partly to the problem of sexual relationships, unwanted pregnancies, and small children, all questions traditionally associated with women. Given the time and social norms dominant then, it was probably extremely difficult for the Party to evolve a rational policy for the recruitment of women.

What were these 'technical difficulties' as they actually manifested themselves? Mainly the sense that women were *physically inferior*. But women in squads moved with the same speed as men. There are also many instances of women showing far more courage and initiative than the men. Swarajyam recalls an incident of how a woman in the squad fired at the police, when the squad leader—who was also her husband—did not give the order to fire on time. Later she was actually reprimanded for indiscipline although her prompt action saved the squad. Acchamamba talks of carrying a comrade who was wounded by a bullet on her shoulder for miles through the forests until she realized that he had died. Dudala Salamma proudly told us that she leapt five feet with big leaders like Badam Ella Reddy and Nalla Narasimhulu. Dronavalli Anasuyamma says:

> There was a strong argument in the Party that women should not be taken into the squads—that it is physically difficult for them. When I wanted to join they said the same thing. I argued saying that nowhere in the world could a revolution succeed without women participating in it. . . . Initially though they were doubtful of my strength, later they

> acknowledged it. Once, while walking from one village to another, the police approached from the opposite side. We escaped and I ran away but the courier got arrested. Then the party changed its attitude. . . . While they could run in three minutes, we would take five minutes. After all we have some physical handicaps, in such times the difference was obvious. But then in practical terms our squad leaders realized that it did not matter.

These were women who insisted on their right to fight beside the men, proved that given the chance of action every handicap would recede, and demonstrated that courage had little to do with mere physical strength. But it was not so easy to convince everyone. Ch. Rajeswar Rao says that the demand that women should come in large numbers and that they should be taken into the squads came from the women themselves. The Party did not encourage it. He admits that the number who actually came in might be small but they worked with a lot of courage. The other problem was that of pregnancy and childbirth. Kamalamma says:

> I was pregnant again. I kept moving around with them, it was time for the child to be born. . . We had no protection there. No hope of getting a midwife. I was very troubled by the thought of delivering the child. . . . There was an old midwife there and they fetched her. I delivered under a cluster of bushes in the night and after the old woman had done her work they drove her away before day break.

After the child was born she moved around again with the squad, but in six months she was forced to give the child away. She talks of how difficult it was when she was asked to give the child away. She describes the event:

> We begged him to take this child and he agreed. I placed the child in his hands and left. After that neither my body, my mind, nor my eyes stayed in my control. There was one torrent of tears from eyes to earth.

The fact that the Party was not in a position to take up the whole question of birth control and unwanted pregnancies led to a situation like Kamalamma's. A consistent policy would have prevented a situation as painful as this. Kamalamma herself did not question the wisdom or necessity of the decision, but she does not deny her pain. Taking up the problem of the child as a problem of the Party organization within a guerilla squad, indeed considering the question of reproduction politically, rather than Kamalamma's personal problem, which was endangering the squad, would have

made the decision more bearable. Not even permitting her to wait until her husband returned to support her left her feeling totally isolated and broken. She was given the choice of returning to the village to be chopped into pieces or of remaining with the squad and giving away the child. Even in such a situation she was pained by the accusation that she did not have a correct proletarian consciousness. While the fact that birth control methods were not as freely available then and the exigencies of underground life could explain away such instances, it is necessary to understand the limitations of these attitudes as they continue to this day. Some women told us that they had used creams and had had themselves operated. If only the Party had placed the same emphasis on training in birth control methods as it had on first aid, healthy cooking and training 'model housewives' the situation may have been different. When these questions are not taken up seriously and earnestly as political questions even today, we must look back and see the consequences of such attitudes for women. Only then does the possibility of understanding and placing the roots of women's oppression as something which is almost parallel to class exploitation, and which must be taken up simultaneously, emerge.

The other 'technical difficulty' that women posed was of course the problem of sexual relationships. The constraints that are placed on a woman's sexuality in any given society are often an index of her real status. While women during the movement were freely allowed to enter the public sphere of production and political action, the moral code by which they were measured was still the code of the private domain—the domain of the family, household, domestic labour and reproduction. Not only was her virtue watched and judged, the responsibility of maintaining the moral tone of the entire group often rested with the women.

Narasamma, a Party member, raises important questions about political education and guidance to women in her letter to the Party. She speaks of the old outlook continuing. Sundarayya quotes excerpts from this in his book:

> You must coach up cadres properly, even if it means a few more days' delay, so that they can go to the villages with a clear understanding. Especially, with regard to cadre protection, enough precaution and care is not being taken. You must give us books which we can understand. You must take more pains to find such material for us. We women are still being looked upon with the old outlook that we are inferior. Any

> slip or mistake we commit, our leaders come down very heavily on us. It becomes a scandal. We must be guided and improved not derided. If we move a little freely, we are watched with suspicion. Why have you not allowed any women to participate in actual guerilla raids on the enemy?

For a perfect instance of how women experienced this continued discrimination there is Acchamamba's story:

> They started a story about me. They said I was having an affair with one of the men. I said it was not true. I was prepared to lose my life, but I was not that kind of woman. They said I was guilty. I said I would stand there, and they could shoot me if they wanted to. I asked them to prove it. I was not afraid of dying. If I was I would not have come into the movement.

She was expelled and a pamphlet issued saying she was expelled. Later they took her back into the Party. Thus a woman who was doing all the medical work in the squad, who was invaluable to the movement, was expelled for what was seen as a moral lapse. Her word did not stand against the suspicion, against the accusation of the man himself. She was checked, searched, and sent out.

Often as a result of such actions women received dual messages from the Party. On the one hand when they were anxious or worried about sexual advances they were probably given to understand that one should adjust to such situations instead of making an issue of trivialities. On the other there was the emphasis on morality and discipline in the Party. There were instances of some men being tried, even executed for womanizing or raping women who gave them shelter or helped them. There were strict instructions that men in the squads should not develop relationships with tribal *koya* women.

The underground existence of the Party, the stage of the struggle would have made all these questions even more problematic and fraught with danger. This could be one of the reasons for the ambiguity and for what appears to be ad hoc action. On the one hand we find manifestations of puritanical anger, as in Acchamamba's case; and on the other we hear of how women who got pregnant when their husbands were away in jail, were helped to secure abortions and attempts were made to reconcile the husband to accepting the fact. But what made it perhaps even more difficult for the women was probably the fact that they have always been

held traditionally responsible for the desires they excite, and the realization that attitudes within the Party had not changed all that much. That they somehow felt responsible. Efforts were undoubtedly made to deal with the problem as sympathetically as possible. But still the contradictions remained. The contradiction between the fact that while officially there were 'no bars' to women being recruited, the uneasy feeling remained that their presence would cause 'technical difficulty'! These women who were constantly confronted with the contradictory messages that kept coming through simultaneously—the gap that yawned between what was overtly stated and covertly felt—must have found their positions precarious and uncertain to say the least. Sugunamma says:

> When we were underground some marriages took place. After all everyone in the dens was not the same. There were some unmarried men, some who had left their wives behind. . . . Before that call it innocence or call it ignorance we thought they were all brothers. Two or three of them wanted to use me. Some were married. I felt troubled that even in the Party people could be like this. After developing the faith that the Party was pure, nothing like this could happen, when it did happen I felt that the only protection I could get would be through marriage. There was no one for me to talk it over with. . . .

The difficulty women felt was inherent in the inadequacy of the situation itself. On the one hand the Party had to scrupulously maintain an image of purity and dedication, on the other it had to cope with the reality of a situation where men and women thrown together were working under conditions of great stress, where relationships that sprang up could not be dealt with in strict accordance with theoretical assumptions or preconceived notions of correctness.

Given the situation if it had been possible to face the contradiction squarely, or attempt to deal with it openly, a lot of the assumptions about women would have perhaps changed perceptibly. But the traditional assumption that prevailed in feudal society that woman was the bearer of virtue and tradition was too deeply rooted in the Party to be questioned radically.

As a result we see that regardless of what the Party would have liked in all earnestness to achieve, the actual conditions were such

that women found that the only protection against sexual advances was marriage; further when relationships sprang up, they found the gossip and the blame was always focussed on women. While individual cases were taken up and personal solutions found, the situation did not seem to allow for any possibility of taking up questions of birth control, sexuality, and reproduction politically.

Today we see that it is only when these questions are dealt with as political questions, when they are not relegated to the private sphere, as merely women's problems, that a fuller participation of women in any movement becomes possible. A context existed to take up issues of reform like child marriages, widow marriage, wife beating, rape and divorce. But historical experience has demonstrated that while these issues do alleviate the condition of women they are ineffective in changing their status. The real measure of this status is the extent of the constraints exercised on her sexuality and reproduction. Comprehending this fully involves a radical questioning of the very structure of the family and the nature of its oppression for women. It would also involve the recognition of the woman's right to choose between the family and political life; it would question the assumption that the onus of maintaining the family intact rested with the women—or indeed that the family had to be kept intact at any cost. There would have been no place for the fear that it was not correct to 'take women away from their husbands.'

The metaphor of the family constantly used to describe the Party reinforced aspects of a feudal culture that continued to assert itself within the organization and perhaps served to keep women in roles which were extensions of their roles in the private sphere. The natural consequence of this was to marginalize their contribution. To understand this marginalization more fully a closer look at the roles that were actually assigned to women in the struggle, their own self-conception, and the Party's attitude to women's work as it emerges in the statements of individual leaders may be useful. Women, we can see, resisted being confined to traditional roles and insisted on coming into the squads and facing danger. They also managed the dens, supplied food to the squads, acted as couriers and nursed the sick—all of which they did with efficiency and pride. They perceived it as significant and necessary work and they performed it with a sense of dignity.

Brij Rani Gour says:

> Those days we had work here in the dens . . . looking after our comrades and giving them medicines . . . There was no such thing as women's work and men's work. There was no such thing as looking down on women in the Party. Our comrades doing all the work . . . they did not see it as secondary or unimportant.

Dronavalli Anasuya says: 'But in the dens women did all the work.' When we actually questioned women about the nature and division of work in the dens and centres they always replied that it was shared equally. But what emerges during the narration is the fact that women were doing most of the work.

We can thus see a discrepancy between what they claimed and what actually happened. It was as if they accepted unquestioningly the ideal of equality without actually looking at the extent of its existence in practice. What we find especially disturbing today, is that in the interviews the emphasis is always on the problems of interpersonal relationships and the responsibilities of sustenance and nurture, rarely on the significant work that they did. Acchamamba's story illustrates this. Here was a woman who at sixteen was perhaps one of the first barefoot doctors in India. With a background like hers one would expect a great deal of detail about her medical experience and some discussion of medical policy or the problems she faced. The emphasis instead is on the adulation she received, the adventures she had and her narrow escapes. Her professional skill becomes secondary, as it were, to her role as a woman. Acchamamba, who recognized the public importance of the work she was doing does not seem to have realized the value of the knowledge she had gained. The result is that there is barely any space in her narrative for her medical skill, which retreats into the background before her numerous problems and adventures. The texture of her experience as a doctor eludes us somehow and we are left with her experience as a woman. The emphasis even for her is on the gratitude and admiration that was showered on her for her skills rather than on the revolutionary dimensions of her practice. We do not need to emphasize the political loss involved in this. 'Where else would they get another person like me?' She says. And she simply lost these hard-earned skills once the struggle ended. We must ask the question—Why?

It is easy enough for us to understand why it was possible for women to take up all kinds of supportive work with such a positive

sense of it if we look at some of their dreams. Speaking of an ideal society, Priyamvada says:

> We dreamt that in families there would be no such thing as women bending before men. We dreamt that we would live so freely and happily. But since repression came so soon we never had time to question whether that equality was in the Party itself. Everybody went underground very soon. The men did not really share the work in the house then.

We have gained some idea of the perception the women had of their own work. Now let us look at some of the trends in the Party. Ravi Narayan Reddy says:

> Some of the women have fought with guns also. Not many, but generally they were helpful in other ways. For instance, cooking food for the squads and then taking messages from one part of the country to another, from one district to another. And then when the squad is fighting, carrying food for them—and all this. They were nurses also, to treat wounded people and all that.

He then adds that women were emancipated as far as the struggle was concerned. Then answering a question about why they were not recruited to the Communist Party: He says:

> I mean, not that way emancipated, in the sense that they did not have the consciousness to fight with rifles and all that. After all they are women is it not? After all they are women; we did not like that women should be taken into the battle fields.

These statements hardly need any further explanation. They are a fair sample of the confusion that results when traditional assumptions are interwoven with programmes of emancipation. And while in a movement there may be a conscious and honest attempt to demonstrate that women are equal, the underlying feeling that 'after all they are women, is it not?'—that women's consciousness is low—so low that they cannot serve on committees, will only serve to put them back into their kitchens when the need for them in the public domain is over. Mallu Swarajyam who commanded a guerilla squad and was a living legend in the Telangana Movement says:

> In the Party they will see only what the movement needs. Questions concerning women are often suppressed . . . Their (women's) use is that. So when the struggle was withdrawn they told us to go and marry

> . . . . We fought with them. We said that even if the forms of struggle had changed we should be given some work.

What happened to the women who had to go back when the struggle was called off? What did it mean to be sent back to the kitchen, to domesticity? Priyamvada says that she often felt like committing suicide. Sugunamma describes how ten years later she asked Swarajyam's husband what Swarajyam was doing, he retorted, 'she is cooking and she is eating. What else? She was horror struck and amazed. If this was how *someone like Swarajyam could be described*, who would bother about someone like her? She also described how when they demanded work, in his typical manner Basavapunniah said, 'What will you do? We are ourselves doing nothing. Go home and stay there.' She says:

> They have used us so long and now they say go stay at home. How could they even understand what the situation was at home? How could one ever tell them? What mental torture—I was really upset. That was my first taste of suffering.

It was this lack of awareness of what it meant for them to go back and the complacency of the assumption that the home was their place after all that really hurt the women. It was then that the degree to which they had been marginalized really struck them. It was because their work in the struggle was at some level always considered secondary that it was so simple to ask them to go back to the kitchens.

All the knowledge, the wisdom and courage gained in the course of the struggle was eventually useful—to sustain the family, after the struggle was called off. Kamalamma begged in her village to feed her children, Acchamamba worked on their farm. Lalitha took up a job as a teacher after taking a series of Hindi examinations, Tai worked as a teacher to support her mother and her husband's family. Salamma carried liquor and worked as a wage labourer to bring up her sons, and so it went on . . . The four walls of the family which had so recently fallen apart releasing the women into the public domain had been propped up more strongly and securely than before. The skills gained at such cost in the public world were eventually used to strengthen and prop up the pillars of the private world.

Priyamvada says that after the parliament elections and Police Action 'these dreams were smashed—crushed like an egg. What a

blow it was. After the elections, do you know where we were? Like the proverbial rug . . . lying exactly where it was thrown.'

If it had only been possible for the women to discuss their problems together, so that they knew what to expect or demand when they faced similar situations, they would perhaps have been less bewildered and mustered some confidence and strength. As things were, most of the women had to turn to a husband, brother, or sister to confide in. What the younger women felt however was the unrelenting pressure to be 'strong'—not to give in to weakness or emotion. That is why even as Kamalamma grieved over the loss of her child, her anguish at being chided for not having a correct proletarian consciousness was even greater. This experience has not changed over time. Even today women are manipulated into denying their anger over what they perceive as unjust for fear of being accused of being emotional, subjective or irrational. There is nothing strange about the fact that the Party organization actually came in the way, prevented women coming together and exchanging experiences, and proved an obstacle in their seeking solutions to their problems. Dronavalli Anasuya tells us how she was warned not to support Swarajyam on some issue. Similarly Swarajyam was warned on another occasion not to support Nagamma out of sympathy or partiality because she was a woman. What is apparent here is a certain trepidation that if women began to support each other on the basis of sisterly solidarity, it would seriously erode the discipline in the Party.

Women were able to tell us of the contradictions that they faced in those days. Unfortunately a consciousness which was aware of the power relations between men and women, and its connections with power relations in society as a whole, which could understand analyse and resolve these contradictions on the basis of that knowledge was not yet available to them at that time.

Let us look for instance at the kind of political education that was imparted at that time. Dronavalli Anasuya says:

> The Party had no great clarity on how to raise women's consciousness. If they are not given political training how can they rise to leadership positions? Although women left their traditional roles and came into the struggle, there was no great change in their awareness of issues that were specific to women. If that had happened then they would have questioned their situation. The reason for that in my opinion is the failure of the Party to prepare women politically.

Kondapalli Koteswaramma speaking of this same matter says humourously, 'In the Bharatiya Mahila Mandali Club, every year they used to hold classes. That political education—without seeing how much they had understood perhaps they went ahead too fast—that is what we feel today . . . It was like feeding an infant *avakai* on his *annaprasan* day.' They would tell us about all kinds of politics. '*The politics were like boiled iron pellets we were barely able to swallow*!'

As we have mentioned earlier, Narasamma's letter to the Party on political education is another good example. Women repeatedly talked about their problems. The fact was that the political education they were given was not easy to grasp. It is also evident that they were aware of the enormous gap that yawned between their own experiences and the political ideological positions that were apparently located so 'far above' them. But how far was the Party in a position to perceive this chasm? And, if it did, did it attribute it to the *backwardness of the women or did it perceive it as a shortcoming in its own political training?*

If the women simply could not understand what was being taught then is it not logical to question the value of such a training? One thing seems certain: that if political education and training is to be relevant to women, then it has to leave behind the boundaries of the public sphere and enter and assimilate even the normally invisible aspects of the private sphere. We would even argue that an adequate understanding, of the 'private' will demand a recasting of our sense of the public.

What are the questions that arise as a result of the women's movement today? Are women's issues being recognized as political issues? Is it possible for us to move towards a 'new society' without confronting the problems that relate to the private sphere? If the experiences and problems that constantly come up in our day-to-day lives are not linked to our politics how can there be an increased awareness of these issues? Without such an increased awareness it seems inevitable that woman will move back after each struggle into their traditional roles. Until we begin to formulate a new politics which goes beyond the boundaries that confine the politics of today.

Writing this book

What did it mean to us as a group to do this work? To tell that story in its entirety would mean a whole new book, but we feel it would be interesting to share a few details about our meetings with the women in this book. None of us was really clear, when we started, about how long the project would take, how many women we would be able to meet, how we would discover where they were, and so on. But once we got started, and met the first few women, we came to know of others and then of others. Four years later, when we began to write this book, we had met and interviewed about seventy women. There are still many we haven't reached. One problem we faced in the beginning was that almost everyone we asked said that if we talked to Mallu Swarajyam or Arutla Kamala (both well known leaders) they would tell us everything about the women in the movement. We had to explain again and again that we wanted to meet *everyone* who had been part of the movement—the leaders as well as the others. When we got to a village, we were often asked again,—'why don't you see Swarajyam or Arutla Kamala?' In Vempati people told us that there were no women in the village who had been part of the movement. But it only took us a couple of hours to locate seven. We were there for many hours, talking to them, learning what had happened and what the struggle meant for them.

The first interview in this book is with Ailamma of Palakurthi. Ailamma is a heraldic figure, for the struggle for her land is the symbolic beginning of the Telangana movement. We found her living with her granddaughter. She was old and weary, but her story was spliced with acid comment about her times. Ailamma's language is typical of the speech of the Telangana villages: rhythmic, metaphoric and often turning to a chant that sounded to us like keening. We have tried to capture some of this quality in the translation. But age was beginning to tell and even in the original Telugu there were parts that we found difficult to decode fully.

What does come through clearly, though, is the intensity of her experience and the sharpness of her intellect. When we played the tape back to her, she laughed and cried as she relived her own story. She died in 1985, a few months after we had met her.

When we went to meet Kamalamma, she was standing there with oil in her hair and a towel on her shoulder—ready to go for her evening bath. She talked to us in the courtyard of her small, well-kept house. The door into the kitchen, clean but quite bare, was ajar. She was not expecting us, but she sat down to talk as soon as we introduced ourselves, and the interview went on till late that evening. She had belonged to a cultural squad and still sings for the Party. While she told us her story she would often stop and sing snatches of songs for us in a deep ringing voice.

Akkirajupalli, Pullayagudem, Aknoor, and Machireddypalli were villages where many women had taken part in the struggle. But mainstream history remembers them mainly as villages where mass rapes had taken place. Pramila Tai and Padmaja Naidu together with a few others, went on a fact finding committee to Aknoor and Machireddypalli, but as far as we know, not to Akkirajupalli, though some of the men there knew of the committee and its work. The women active here were mainly agricultural labourers—the 'nameless heroines'—on whose resistance and support the movement survived. The women who talked to us there belonged to two age groups: one in thier forties, another in their sixties. What we have in the book is a discussion with a group of thirteen women. One of the difficulties we had there was that the men around were so keen to help that they insisted on 'conducting' and 'guiding' the discussion. Finally we had to move into a room inside a house so that we could talk with the women in some privacy.

Priyamvada was the first person we met after we had decided on the study. Sitting around a dining table in one of our homes, we listened spellbound to the articulate and political account of the struggle that came from this soft-spoken, self-effacing woman. Many of us were deeply moved by her life story which brings out at its rawest the sense of betrayal and loss some women felt at that time. Priyamvada is deeply involved in the life of her village, even today.

We travelled to Miapur, about 20 km from Hyderabad to visit Sugunamma at her farm. The house is warm and welcoming and

the farm quite beautiful. Sugunamma herself is active, constantly reading and thinking about women's issues, willing to sink group differences and work with other women's organizations. She is an open and affectionate woman, ready to enter theoretical discussions with keenness that made the exchange a stimulating experience for us. We had also worked together on one of the earliest campaigns our group had been involved in, to ban the export of vegetables to the Middle East.

Pramila Tai, ('Tai' means 'mother' and is an honorific) still active in the Party, welcomed us to her neat house in the heart of old Hyderabad. There was a veritable forest of ferns growing tall in a tiny patch of garden in her small courtyard. What makes Tai's story significant is the fact that she was drawn into the Party because of the contacts and organizational skills she developed in a women's organization—the Navjivan Mahila Mandal. Talking to her you realize that this is not a woman who lives or belongs to the past. All the other oral histories in this book have been translated from Telugu or Hindi, but Tai spoke in English and what we have here is a transcript of the original.

Kondapalli Koteswaramma now works as the warden of a hostel. We recorded her story in her daughter's house in Vijayawada. She belonged to the Andhra Communist Party and was very active in the cultural squad and the work of the Party. A writer who composed several songs and poems, she has also published under the pen name of Vatsala. Among her works are a series of five stories, told in verse, by a mother to her son. These speak of social injustice and the sacrifices of ordinary women. Women are the central characters in these verse narratives.

Dudala Salamma was a name we heard from many. We went to meet her in Quila Shapur, a place often mentioned in the tales told of the Telangana days. It was noon when we arrived there. We went to the fields looking for her and finally saw her standing, hands resting on her hips, near her son's well. We sat there together under a tree, talking until it grew dark.

As her story shows, Manikonda Suryavathi's interests were mainly in public life. The interview gives us a wide sense of the major events of the time. It helps us make connections that illuminate many of the other stories and to get a sense of how the problem of women was understood at the time.

Our visit of Kunuru where Acchamamba lived was particularly

adventurous. We heard of her when we were in Warangal, and drove down to a village nearby, only to find we had to cross a large dry riverbed to get to her house. As we stood there, wondering what to do, a tractor drove up and offered to take us there. Two of us had to sit at the back on the tractor blades as we drove precariously along the edge of the riverbed. Everytime the tractor jumped, the blades would sway violently, threatening to chop us up! We managed to arrive at the village by noon. Meeting Acchamamba was so exciting that we soon forgot the adventures of the journey. Acchamamba, whose real name was Susheela, had been re-named after Dr Acchamamba who was a formally trained medical doctor. Unfortunately we have not been able to make a real record of her contribution and this is perhaps the best place to acknowledge a major omission. As a doctor her support to the movement was crucial. People who fell ill or were injured in the forest areas were sent to her. Suguna, for instance, tells us she went to her for her delivery. Her house was a contact centre during the struggle and she had links with hospitals and other doctors in Madras to whom she referred the specialized cases. Many women who left their families and came into the Party found her place as reassuring and comforting as a mother's house. She was a legend in those days. She published two books, one on child birth and the other one on child care and contraception, in 1959. Our Acchamamba however, was a young barefoot doctor, trained in the movement, who travelled in the forests rendering first aid and medical care to the squads and the tribals.

Baji and Begum are sisters who now live together. Their whole family was involved in the struggle. Baji, who is the older of the two, was involved in the movement from its very beginning. For her to come out of purdah and take part in these activities was undoubtedly a courageous act at that time. Razia (Begum) got involved later. She went to jail. She teaches at the University now. These were the only two Muslim women we were able to interview, though many, especially in Hyderabad—were active. Their house was practically a centre of radical activity in the city at that time.

Meeting Moturi Udayam was an experience quite different from any of the others. Udayam—hearty, energetic, full of warm humour, kept us in splits throughout the interview. Her narrative was a mime show in itself. At points we had to beg her to stop

while we wiped our eyes, changed the tape and took another breath. A born rebel, she seemed, open and frank. What warmed us most was her capacity to laugh at herself and everything else around her.

Brij Rani was in bed with a bad back when we met her. But she sat up and talked. Hers is a story of great personal courage and initiative. She was a Party organizer, living dangerously, constantly on the move. Today she runs a sewing centre in the heart of Hyderabad.

Lalithamma of Suryapet, had just returned from the school where she still teaches, when we went to meet her. She had qualified as a teacher after the struggle had been called off, and started teaching to support her family. She told us her story, in a soft gentle voice, as she patted one of her grandchildren to sleep.

We have very little information about Pesara Sattema of Addaguduru. But around the village where she lives, her name is still on every lip. It was difficult to think of this woman, crippled in both legs, as having leapt over walls—until she began to speak. . .

Mallu Swarajyam. We were so excited to be with her that during the first interview as we all crowded around her squatting on a bed we forgot to turn on the tape recorder! And we lost one of the most spontaneous and wide ranging of the stories we heard. Two years later, she sat with us again, from 10.00 in the night till 2.00 in the morning, snatching time from a busy schedule. She is still very active in the Party. For us, it was a problem tracking her down. We would travel from one village to another chasing her to find that she had left a few hours ago. No book on the Telangana Struggle would be complete without a reference to this astonishing woman, who is a living legend.

These are the women whose life stories appear in the book. But we met and spoke with so many others whose stories we could not include. Women from towns like, Nellore, Vijayawada and Miryalguda, women in Bhongir and Pullayagudem and Vempati. Vajramma, of Bhupathipet near Warangal, whose eyes still shine like that of a child, welcomed us as if we were old friends, and kept talking to us, she set fire to a heap of freshly harvested peanuts, roasting them expertly for us. We didn't want to leave any more than she wanted to let us leave. She asked us to come again, all of us, so that we could go on a picnic together, on the hill across from her hut. In Vijayawada we visited Jyosyabhatla Subbamma as she lay

hospitalized with jaundice. We promised her that the book would be ready soon. But she died before we were able to bring it out, and we feel we have failed her in some way. When we met Laxmi, she was very ill. She had cancer of the colon. She talked all the same, using whatever slender sources of energy she had left. It was a meeting that left us stunned and humbled by her sheer will and the determination to communicate.

These are some of the many, many stories that do not appear here, but which are in no way less interesting or important. We hope to publish them as soon as we have the opportunity.

When we first chose to do this study, one of our aims was to recover our own history (we saw the women in the Telangana Struggle as founders of a history of women's action in Andhra, indeed in India itself. So we thought we would be tracing a lineage). We envisaged the study as an analysis of the role of women in the Telangana Movement. The life stories that we collected were to be part of our data! Would all of us agree on such an analysis; would there be different trends; would it be balanced, fair enough, radical enough, we wondered. There was a growing anxiety about the end result (none of us quite foresaw at the time the shape it would take). The interviews, we began to find, were astonishing, rich, moving. Our relationship with these women grew more concrete day by day. But it was after we had done nearly forty interviews, that we decided it would be best to publish them as life-stories. We now thought of it as a book that was theirs, as much as it was ours. We were also encouraged because we had read and enjoyed *Let me Speak* and *Sandino's Daughters*.

We didn't realize how much work was involved in editing these stories, and getting them ready for print. There is a world of difference—between the spoken word and the written—and an even greater one between the spoken word in one language and the written form of another. We struggled with the problem of the speaker's voice and tone. For some of the dialects there were no definite conventions of transcriptions. We struggled with the translation. The process of editing itself was a difficult one. On the one hand we would be deeply involved with the story, on the other we would stand back critically and look at what it meant. Then we would try to read between the lines, search out what was unsaid, what lay behind the pain.

Constantly with us was the feeling that this was all out of our

own lives—that we had been there before ourselves. We matched incidents in their lives with those in ours: oh she's like you or X or Y, we'd comment. Gradually these stories became a part of our own mythology. It was only as we struggled through this editing that we realized that an analysis could follow at any time but that their voices had to be heard.

About the language in this book

There are many aspects to the language in this book that do not come through in the English translation, but which we feel we should share with the non-Telugu reader. Such a discussion would put some problems we had to tussle with as we listened to, transcribed, edited these histories into the perspective of struggles over questions of language and power that are probably taking place all over the world.

We need to start with yet another history. At the time of the Telangana Armed Struggle, Urdu was the official language. That meant it was not only the language of government and public life but also the sole medium of education from primary school up the professional colleges. To be educated, even literate, in those times meant to be well versed in 'high' Urdu and often Persian. One of the major issues in the Telangana Struggle was the right to establish Telugu schools, publish Telugu newspapers and re-establish the use of the mother tongue for the large majority of the people. But even after Independence when Telugu was officially recognized and taught, the Telangana form of the language continues to be regarded as inferior or non-standard. One reason for this was that it had, over the course of time, incorporated many Urdu words and idioms, and its rhythms differed from the 'purer', 'classical' forms of the more Sanskritized Telugu of the other regions of Andhra. It was therefore regarded as a kind of pidgin, limited in scope and not spoken or used in educated circles.

For the Telugu reader, one of the most striking aspects of the book is the way it has captured the Telangana form of the language in some of the interviews. At first glance this might seem quite simple. We had what the women said on tape and all we had to do was transcribe and print it. Easier said, of course, than done. Despite our determination to be absolutely faithful to the original, we found it difficult not to 'correct' what we heard as we wrote it down—almost unconsciously as it were. Friends, who were also

sympathetic to our intentions, complained when they first read the manuscript that the words hadn't been properly spelt, that lexical rules had been violated, that the shifts from one subject to the other were too abrupt. We went back to the tapes, to check, and talk it over and check yet again. What emerged finally was a result of a quite unspectacular, but dogged labour of resistance and assertion, through which we had to unlearn as much as we learnt.

Part of the disorientation, of course, was because of the distance, common to all languages, between written and spoken forms. Today the gap between the language *spoken* by some social classes and the standard written form is closing in. A good novelist or journalist would take pride in being able to write as though she were speaking. But it is only when one sets oneself the task of careful transcription that one becomes aware of how much is involved in that simple phrase 'as though'. How different what writer and reader agree to accept as speech is from what the tape records. In speech we complete sentences in so many ways—with a nod of the head, a wave of the hand, a shrug of the shoulder. Statements take on meaning or lose it as part of a dialogue that is created in so many ways—a gesture, a smile, the sparkle in the eye, a withheld response, a quizzical look, a sound or movement, an anxious or normative presence, even in another room. The sense changes according to the context. Besides, conversations have, what appears in writing as a loose even disconnected or repetitive structure. On the other hand what might have taken paragraphs of explanation on the page can be condensed into a word, or a look, or a silence. Of course, all this is true of Andhra Telugu, but all the more so of Telangana Telugu which does not have a standard written form. Only very recently have attempts been made, even in fiction, to use Telangana Telugu. So there were few established conventions of spelling or even word boundary we could draw on. We often wondered whether we, none of us linguists, were adequate to the task; whether the reader also schooled as we were, into 'standard' Telugu would be able to go beyond the difficulties of decoding to respond to the agility, the vivid, metaphoric expression and the unusual cadences of the language. Ailamma and Dudala Salamma, for instance, not only use a different vocabulary, but draw on whole conventions of expression, orchestration and elaboration that are unfamiliar and marginalized. It struck us as we worked with these texts, that the forms and conventions (the

connections, the switching of subjects, the tonal inflections, the elaboration by association and negotiation as against 'logical' derivation) of women's language and the issues that interested us had also been similarly obscured and delegitimated. We thought we were being too ambitious trying to jump across barriers of class, sex, dominant and subordinate cultures, oral and written forms all in one leap as it were. But we tried. There are many things we could have done better. Many things that others, we hope, will do better.

Is there really a women's language we are asked. There are many long, even technical answers to the question. But the most convincing answer comes from our experience. We remember the interviews when the men hovered around, prompting and rectifying the 'defects' in the women's statements and their memories. Their urge to guide, order, restate, one is constrained to say even police, the memories that came pouring out, putting things in a 'proper' way (often much to our dismay), just seem to indicate that women do speak a different language. They use the same words, even the same syntax, but the whole mode in which they use or inhabit the language is different.

It has also been difficult, as we translated this spoken language, to capture these forms of expression and these rhythms in an alien tongue. Trying to preserve the particular quality of individual speakers without making it so local that it would seem quaint, has been another problem that we have faced. Phrases such as 'I'm your slave' or 'I fall at your feet' that are so commonly used, especially in Telangana that they have practically become exclamations, not necessarily indicative of bondage or subservience, posed a further problem to translation—one that we have not been able to solve satisfactorily. Of course, a major feature of this book—the fact that we have, side by side, rural and urban forms as well as Telangana and Andhra Telugus can hardly come through in a translation.

Glossary

Andhra Pitāmaha : Title of honour meaning illustrious father of Andhra.

Annaprāsanam : A ritual first meal offering of rice/solids to an infant.

Ārya Samāj : Reform Movement of the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Combined a critique of idolatory, polytheism, child marriage, taboo on widow remarriage and caste based on birth with a purified Hinduism based on Vedic infallibility.

Āvakāi : A very hot mango, chilli and mustard pickle–a delicacy, typical of Andhra. (Koteswaramma says that the political education they were given was much like giving āvakāi to an infant as a first solid.)

Ayudha Pūja : Annual worship of weapons (today also tools). A tradition from the epics.

Banjar lands : Dry lands customarily kept for common pasture.

Baniya : Caste consisting primarily of merchants, traders and moneylenders.

Brahma : The creator of the Universe. One of the trinity comprising the creator, sustainer and destroyer.

Burrakatha : A form of folk narrative in which the lives of people are depicted through songs and dances. The burra is a clay percussion instrument.

Chalam : Gudipāti Venkatāchalam, a prominent early twentieth century literary figure (1894–1979) whose works in Telugu talk about women's oppression.

Chilman : Slit curtain made of thin bamboo strips.

Choultry : Free resting place for travellers.

Chowkidār : Watchman.

Coolie : Hired labourer.

Cutcheri : Office of a village official, most often located in his house itself.

Dronāchārya : see *Ekalavya*.

Dalam : Armed squad belonging to the Communist Party usually consisting of five or seven members.

Divan : Minister in the Nizam's government.

Diwani or *Khalsa* : Land under governmental land revenue system.

Dharma : Concept of cosmic justice and rule.

Dudekula : Literally a person who cleans and processes the cotton. Part of the Muslim community called thus by their profession.

Ekalavya : In the Mahabharata, Ekalavya of a hunter's caste, learnt archery using Dronacharya's statue and acknowledged him as a guru. Dronacharya then demanded his right thumb as his fee (*guru dakshina*) so that his favourite pupil Arjuna would have no peer. Today it is sometimes used to denote an ideal teacher-student relationship.

Errakka : A village deity (goddess). Literally, erra is red/fair and akka is sister.

Freedom Fighter's Pension : A pension, accorded by the Government, to those who were imprisoned during India's Freedom Struggle, extended to include the struggle against the Nizam's rule.

Ganesh Chaturthi : A festival when Lord Ganesha is worshipped.

Ghosha : System of seclusion of women, prevalent among many Muslims and upper caste Hindus.

Golden Threshold : The former residence of Sarojini Naidu. Presently occupied by the University of Hyderabad.

Golla Gollasuddulu : A sub-caste of Hindus who are professionally cattle raisers; Gollasuddulu are traditional shepherd's tunes played on the flute. These songs were rewritten and very effectively used by the cultural squads of the Communist Party.

Goondas : Thugs or musclemen. Often hired by landlords to attack the peasantry.

Gudem : Areas where normally the low caste people in the village lived. Also means hamlets.

Gurajada : Gurajada Appa Rao (1860–1915) was a forerunner of the literary renaissance in Andhra. His witty and elegant play 'Kanyasulkam' was first published in 1897 but performed many times earlier. It raises many of the issues of the social reform movement.

Gutapala Sangham : Organization where members wielded sticks as weapons. It became a mass organization linked to the Communist Party.

Harikatha : Traditionally mythological stories which are narrated by a single person, using humour, song and dance, accompanied by musical instruments.

Havaldar : Police constable.

Id-ul-Milad : Prophet's birthday. *Seerat-un-Nabi* : Life of the Prophet.

Inam : A present, a gratuity to a dependent. Also a technical term denoting land granted in gift and rent free.

Jashna-Mahtab : A party or a private celeberation on a moonlit night.

Kabaddi : A physically vigorous sport played primarily by men.

Kamma : Nominally a sudra sub caste. In Andhra it is a powerful landed community.

Kanyasulkam : See *Gurajada*.

Karanam : Village accountant, nearly always a Brahmin; an official of importance.

Kavadi : Any two pieces of luggage or two pots of water tied to a long stick balanced on the shoulder. A common way of carrying loads.

Lakshman rekha : A mythical line drawn by Lakshman, which Sita was not allowed to cross (Ramayana). Today used to mean areas women are forbidden to enter and things women are prohibited from doing.

Lambadas : A nomadic tribe.

Lāthi charge : Police using batons and sticks to disperse a crowd. Commonly used even now.

Madi : A whole range of purificatory customs observed by orthodox Brahmins which exclude other castes and sometimes even other Brahmins from cooking and praying together. During menstruation and for forty days after childbirth, women are considered ritually unclean.

Mādiga : A caste of harijans.

Mahila : (Hindi) Woman.

Maidānam : Literally means plains. An important novel by Chalam. Also see *Chalam*.

Maistri : Mason/Foreman/Supervisor.

Mālapalli : A harijan hamlet. It was also the title of an epic novel about the untouchables written by Unnava Lakshminarayana, one of the first intellectuals influenced by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

Malipatel : Administrative officer of the village.

Mangalasutra : A chain of black beads with two gold pendants worn only by married women.

Matka : Mudpot.

Mattelu : Toe rings worn by married women.

Nazrana : Gift usually offered to the Nizam. If anybody wanted to meet the Nizam they had to offer gold coins as gifts.

Jagir/Jagirdar : Jagir: land that is gifted for the services rendered to the ruler. Jagirdar: the owner of a Jagir.

Pativrata : Literally pati means husband and vrata means vow. A pativrata is a virtuous wife; one who (like Sita) will make any sacrifice for her husband. It is difficult to capture the all pervasive scope of this religious/cultural ideal.

Patwari : Village official in charge of land records and other administrative matters.

Praja Natya Mandali : An important people's theatre organized by Communist Party workers and activists during the movement.

Pulusu ; A thin curry made with tamarind and spice.

Police Action : The action taken by the Indian Union government when the Nizam refused to accede to the Union. It was in fact a military action, taken initially against the Razakars.

Police Patel : Chief police officer of the village.

Ranadive Thesis : Proposed by the General Secretary of the CPI, B T Ranadive in February 1948 during the second Congress of the Party. It stated that India was not an independent state, it was in fact a semi-colony of Britain ruled by Imperialist capital. A call for armed insurrection all over the country was given. The thesis was followed by general strikes all over India led by the CPI. He was overruled in 1950 and the thesis was rejected.

Rāvan : The (demon) King from the epic Ramayana.

Razakars : Private militia of the Majlis, a fundamentalist Islamic sect, powerful in the Nizam's regime.

Ryotwari; ryot : A term of land tenure which the occupant of the land holds under lease from the Government and enjoys all advantages of absolute proprietorship subject to payment of revenue to the Government. Introduced by Sir Thomas Munroe in 1802. The idea was to abolish all intermediaries after the abolition of Zamindari and Inam.

Sabha/Maha Sabha : Meeting/Large meeting (conference).

Samsthānams : Large areas of land given to reward officers who distinguished themselves in serving the Nizam.

Sangham
Praja/Bala Sangham/
Mahila Sangham : Sangham is an organization. Praja Sangham is a people's organization; Bala Sangham a children's organization and Mahila Sangham a women's organization.

Sarf-E-Khas : Nizam's own estate or State owned lands.

Sarpanch : Elected village head.

Sātāni : A caste.

Section 144 : Law that prohibits gathering of more than 5 persons in particular notified areas. Still operative.

Sharada Act : Passed in 1929. It raised the age of marriage to 14 for girls and 18 for boys. Was very controversial in its time.

Sowcar/Sahukār : Rich businessman, usually a moneylender.

Split in the C P : The Indian Communist Party split twice: first in 1964 giving rise to the CPI(M). Later in 1968 the CPI(ML) broke away from the CPM.

Sri Sri : Srirangam Srinivasa Rao. Eminent Telugu poet, writing mainly in the thirties and forties, whose revolutionary poetry is popular and a source of inspiration to many.

Stree : 'Woman'. Controversial and significant collection of essays, written by Chalam. Also see *Chalam*.

Swarāj : Self rule.

Tahsildār : The administrative and revenue officer of a tehsil. A tehsil is an administrative unit of a district.

Telagās : A Hindu sub-caste.

Vandemātaram : National song written by Bankimchandra Chatterji (from his book *Anand Math*).

Veereshalingam : Social reformer who contributed to women's education and widow remarriage movements. Also described by several scholars as the pioneer of modernism in Andhra.

Vetti : Forced labour and exactions which was a privilege of landlords and officials. It was an all pervasive social phenomenon affecting all backward classes in varying degrees. Reduced the life of the Telangana people to utter degradation and serfdom.

Ugādi : A Telugu and Kannadiga festival that celebrates the beginning of spring, which is also a New Year day.

Upmā : A savoury made of coarse ground wheat, oil and spices.

Yamapuri : Hell in Hindu mythology.

Zamindari : The feudal system supported by the British where land was held by the landlords with enormous powers to collect revenue and taxes. This land tenure system led to the acute impoverishment of the peasantry.

Zilla (also *Jilla*) : An administrative unit.

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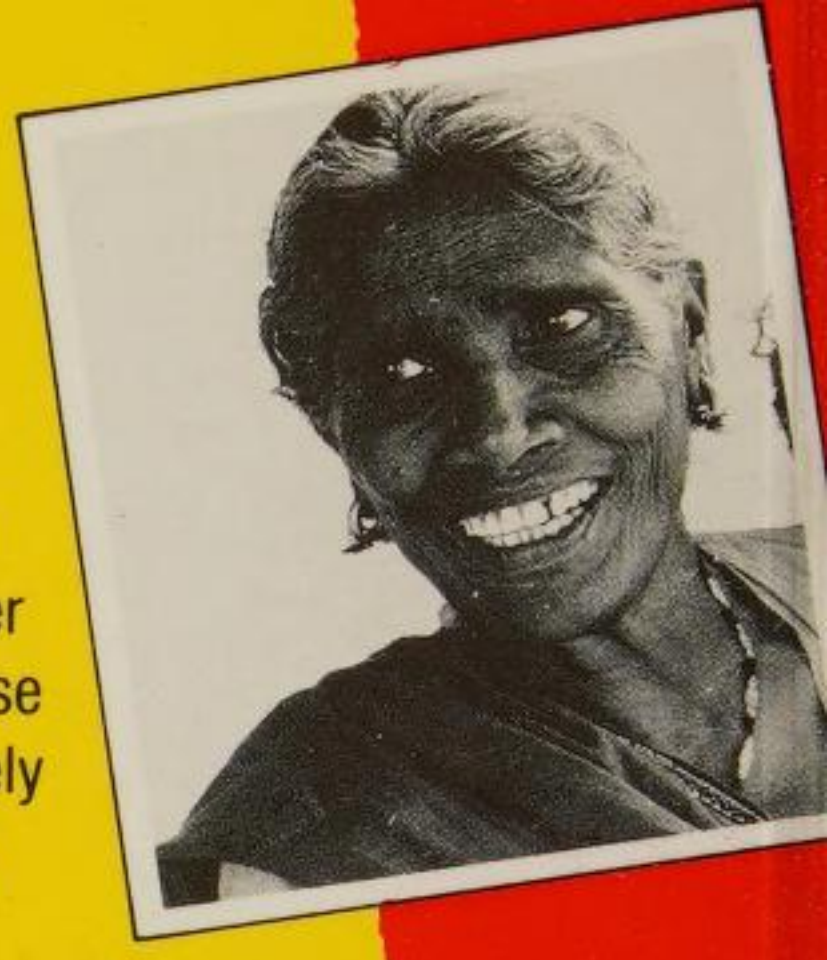

'We left our pots and pans and ran into the jungle'

The Telangana struggle (1948-51) against the feudal overlords in the princely state of Hyderabad, and later against the Indian army itself, is now legendary. These interviews with some of the women who were actively involved provide what has been missing from every history of the uprising: an account of the women's significant participation in the struggle.

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This extraordinary document raises issues still relevant today, of the misrepresentation and exclusion of women from history and their exploitation by movements on the left.

Stree Shakti Sanghatana is a women's collective in Hyderabad.

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